

Teaching Philosophy

For someone like me the phrase ‘teaching philosophy’ has two meanings. It can refer to an approach or understanding of the practice of teaching; or it can refer to teaching philosophy, the subject—the subject that, as it happens, I teach. This ambiguity need not concern us—it is impossible for me to think of either without thinking of the other. A route to appreciating this is to dwell on a paradox or difficulty at the heart of teaching a topic like philosophy.

Though it is never regarded as sound pedagogy, we can at least understand the temptation to think that for some subjects the goal teaching is a simple transmission of knowledge from someone, an expert, who has a lot of it, to an audience of students, who have a lot less of it. Teachers teach and students, hopefully, learn.

To be sure, philosophy professors are experts—we are familiar with a wide range of thinkers, some widely celebrated and others known only to those who share a narrow specialization. And we have mastered the jargon and methods that allow us to read, and compose, complex texts. There is a litany of things a philosophy professor ought to know—a canon of thinkers, the difference between stronger and weaker arguments, the classic positions staked on the classic question. Imparting some small part of this to our students is certainly a piece of what we do.

But to just do that would never suffice, and indeed would at best amount to teaching *about* philosophy. What we want is to *do* philosophy, and to teach our students to do philosophy as well. At its core philosophy is about questions we never tire of asking, and the exploration of the diverse and competing answers given by thinkers dispersed in both space and time. Most importantly, philosophy reminds us to keep the unsettled nature of its own history and tradition firmly in mind as we grapple with both timeless quandaries and contemporary controversies. Though it sometimes frustrates students used to being told, at least eventually, that this or that is the right answer, the point of philosophy is to search for and articulate and defend answers we know will always be subject to further challenge.

The paradox is apparent: how do you teach what you happily admit you don’t know? An answer was provided by Socrates, who famously recognized no wisdom other than realizing one’s own lack of it. The paradox is resolved when we lead students to see the value in simply asking the questions and exploring the answers. Along the way we come to see that doing this with students imparts something of value in the way of self-understanding, epistemic humility, and intellectual curiosity.

To teach philosophy is to embrace a pedagogy marked by patience, questioning, and intellectual adventure. It is best pursued—and Socrates taught us this as well—in conversations where all can offer ideas and honest critique in turn, engaged in a spirit of both playfulness and seriousness. It’s when students eagerly join in a frank discussion of difficult questions that we know we have succeeded.