

TEACHING STATEMENT - MB

The clock rolls over to one and students begin to look around the circle of chairs in earnest, their voices shifting from personal conversation to class business. Kalia speaks first, “Abdi’s not here. And Kate—she’s never late. I think she’s out too.” Sam chimes in, “Abdi’s dad is still in the hospital. He’s there again to translate today.” Then Shireen, “Is anyone sending Abdi and Kate a summary of class? I can do it if no one else is planning to.”

No one is watching me and I can’t help smiling. Three weeks ago these students had never met. I remember the nervous silence before class began on the first day. Each small noise highlighted the emptiness from the lack of voices. Many students hiding in their phones, waiting for the clock to strike one and shift the focus and responsibility in the room to me. By now, though, they know that’s not going to happen. Even better, they know they don’t need it to happen.

As they begin small-group discussions, I move about, reflecting their thoughts back to them when it seems helpful, occasionally asking for more on how their thoughts connect to the text, how the text connects to other aspects of class or to their experiential learning work. All my questions are sincere. They recognize this, too; I don’t ask for what I already know.

From day one, I position myself as a coach and a co-learner in a community made up of me, my students, and the world around us. As we address philosophical questions, I encourage honesty, working with the students to connect ideas to the current topic. I draw from personal experiences, modeling how to apply philosophy to our world. We evaluate arguments and ask genuinely interesting questions, which pushes all of us, including myself, to inquire further. I encourage students to engage with questions when they are unsure of answers, and to value their own lives and experiences as a means to understanding and engaging with philosophy. I find that when my students engage in these ways, I am able to learn from them, and I see students learning from each other as well. The community-oriented values and authenticity curated in my classroom develops strengths, knowledge, and experience beyond what I could offer on my own.

Students arrive with different backgrounds, interests and college-preparation levels. Philosophy classrooms flourish when they promote a diversity of voices, and our teaching practices must support those voices. When I teach, I design for various access points into the material and acknowledge personal reflection’s ability to inspire rigorous academic work. I often use exercises instead of lecturing – activities that scaffold difficult concepts. This helps engage students who may otherwise be reticent to participate, as it provides a safe space to discover new, challenging material before they are expected to perform for an audience. Individually, providing a variety of activities both respects and engages students with different learning styles. Collectively, it supports students in being—and viewing themselves as—valued members of the learning community.

Philosophy courses can inform students’ actions and decisions in the world. Philosophy can serve as a vital part of their education, helping them transform into thoughtful global citizens. Students will leave a great philosophy class realizing that the course helped them re-envision who they are and that the skills they’ve garnered will, throughout their lives, change the way they interact with the world.