

Guy Schuh: Teaching Statement

My pedagogy is centered around the art of philosophical conversation. We learn best when we take it upon ourselves to communicate our views to those who don't already agree with us; open-mindedly entertain the views of those we don't agree with; and justify our views to others and respond to their concerns and objections. Mastering these skills not only makes us excellent philosophical conversationalists, but good and well-rounded thinkers. An important part of my pedagogy is training students to practice these skills with the absent authors of the philosophical texts that they read for class.

As a prerequisite to simulating a philosophical conversation with the absent author of a philosophical text, students need to develop good reading habits. To this end, I hold them accountable for their reading. I either assign reading response questions that students have to answer before the class we'll discuss a reading or assign them a reading quiz. Once students have developed good reading habits, I train them in both asking probing questions about a reading and also answering those questions on behalf of the author. An excellent assignment for developing this skill is having students teach a class on the day's reading. Students are required to compose a handout outlining the sections of the reading they'll focus on; explain those sections to the class—in effect, walk the class through their handout; field any questions about or objections to the reading that other students may have; and then present their own set of questions on the reading to the class for discussion. I'm sure to first model the presentation and the accompanying handout to students before they begin their own presentations. I also require that students workshop their presentations with me outside of class. This allows me to remedy any serious misunderstandings and also point students towards the more philosophical rich parts of a reading. As a result of this preparation, I've had some excellent student presentations on some difficult topics.

An important part of philosophical conversation is the giving of, and responding to, objections. I find that providing objections comes easily to students, but thinking charitably about how an author would respond to their objection is more difficult. I therefore put a lot of emphasis on coming up with responses to an objection on behalf of an author. I also find that this exercise significantly increases students understanding of a position and what sorts of commitments it entails. One of my favorite assignments for sharpening this skill is to give students the task of writing out an objection to any of the readings we've done for a given unit. I then reserve an entire class for the presentation, and discussion, of these objections where, after each student has presented and explained their objection to the class, we think together about how the author could best respond to it. I also do a competitive group version of the same assignment. I break students into groups and assign each group the responsibility of coming up with an objection to a reading. Then, after each group has presented its own objection, I have students vote on which objection they find to be the most compelling. Finally, I have students repeat the process for a response to that objection. I find that putting a competitive spin on the assignment really helps engage and motivate students.

Finally, I myself strive to model good philosophical conversation for the class. I encourage frequent student questions and objections, and I take them very seriously; for example, when I get a student objection, I take the time to first explain it to the class, and then I present what I believe would be the author's response. I also encourage students to talk with me about unresolved questions after class and during office hours. For example, one student disagreed with Aristotle's claim that maintaining a friendship requires an equal return of benefits from the other friend. After we discussed how Aristotle would try to respond to her criticism, she expanded her objection into a term paper