

# Teaching Statement

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“I don’t know who you are anymore. Ever since you started studying philosophy you’ve changed. I really regret the day you decided to take a philosophy class.”

I realized two things when my—now ex—husband shouted those words at me during my last year of college. First, my marriage was over. And second, I wanted to become a philosophy professor.

My ex-husband was right; philosophy changed me. Before I encountered philosophy, I didn’t know what critical analysis was, I didn’t know what cogent argumentation looked like, and I certainly didn’t regard either activity as relevant to my way of life. On the contrary, I had a clearly marked life path. I’m a first-generation Syrian American and neither of my parents have college degrees. I got married at 20, and the expectation, set by my Lebanese ex-husband and our conservative Muslim families, was that I would follow him. I wouldn’t consider a job that could require us to live apart and I would never choose a career he didn’t approve of because he always knew what was best. I could pursue higher education, but only if it did not disrupt the traditional duties of matrimony.

Studying philosophy brought all of this into question for me. In particular, I recall one example quite vividly: About halfway through a course in the history and philosophy of science, we read Elliott Sober’s (1990) paper on the concept of scientific testability. According to Sober, testing is contrastive and requires independently supported auxiliary assumptions. We do not confirm a hypothesis or explanation in isolation; rather, we look for evidence that can discriminate between different and competing hypotheses to determine which has the best support from the data. Furthermore, we do not simply invent assumptions designed to contribute to the confirmation of a hypothesis. Instead, we rely on supplementary assumptions (concerning, say, the operation of our measuring instruments, and the effects of background conditions) we already have good reason to believe are true. We were learning about Sober’s notion of testability in the context of the philosophy of biology, but it occurred to me that the notion might have a much broader reach. I had never *tested* my views about how to live against other possibilities—and, to the extent that I had ever compared my views to others, I had done so by appealing to assumptions that I had no independent reason to accept as true. Reflection on this fact led me to change my major from biology to philosophy, and this change confirmed I was right that the notion of testability extends beyond the scientific domain. It

can also be used to critically challenge views about institutions like marriage, religion, and government, and how those institutions relate to ideals of equality and social justice. I came to see the fragility of unreflective devotion and dogmatic allegiance, and to appreciate the complexity of issues I once saw in black and white. Most significantly, I became confident in my beliefs and ways of living because it forced me to examine what reasons I could offer for or against them rather than relying on mere rationalizations. I feel very fortunate to have benefited so palpably and practically from the study of philosophy, and I want to be a professor to help others enjoy similar benefits. In other words, I want to help others gain the philosophical skills that can usefully inform their own thinking about how to live, and hopefully empower them to live in those ways.

Because of this skills-focused ambition, there are two goals I have for my students. First, to learn what philosophy is. Second, to learn how to do philosophy well. I always begin the first day of class with a definition of philosophy. *What is philosophy?* I define philosophy as consisting of two components: the first is the clarification of concepts and the second is the analysis of arguments. The rationale behind these two components is that any inquiry must begin by being as clear as possible about what it is we are trying to study. We cannot productively analyze arguments about a concept until the concept is clear. With this learning goal accomplished on the first day, the rest of the course is dedicated to helping students improve their clarificatory and analytical skills.

My class format and argument reconstruction assignments are essential in helping students achieve these goals. I require students to complete 10 argument reconstructions in premise-conclusion form on different papers during the semester. The argument reconstructions are always due the Sunday prior to the week we discuss them. There are several benefits to these assignments. First, they ensure that the majority of students have read the assigned reading on any given day. Second, they provide some of the evidence I need to evaluate a student's progress. By requiring 10 reconstructions over the course of the semester, I am able to track students' improvement in accurately understanding and articulating an argument. Third, and most importantly, it makes students practice. Philosophy is an activity like any other: math, soccer, chess, dancing. As with other activities, it is necessary to practice in order to improve. So, we practice critically scrutinizing the course material and our own views to the highest degree, while also being as charitable as possible, over and over.

My class format is primarily open discussion and follows from the definition of philosophy I provide. I put the argument(s) from the assigned reading in premise-conclusion form on the board and we begin with the first step of philosophy. So, the first few minutes of every class are spent by students identifying, defining, and asking questions about any concepts that seem central to the argument. After we've clarified the relevant concepts, we begin step two, which is analyzing the argument. Having the arguments in premise-conclusion form helps students isolate what an argument hangs on, and makes it easier to evaluate and develop objections to it. The argument reconstruction assignments have the added benefit of actively involving students in their own learning because we use them every single class. Before presenting an argument, I always

put the names of the students who completed an argument reconstruction on the board and I thank them for *helping me* reconstruct the argument for that day. I've found this makes students feel appreciated and thus more encouraged to participate in class discussions. (This also helps me learn all my students' names the first week of class. After failing to learn my students' names the first time I taught, I realized how important this is.)

Because different students have different learning styles, in addition to the argument reconstruction assignments, I typically require two exams and two paper assignments. (Sometimes I also sprinkle in a pop quiz here and there to keep students on their toes.) By having four different kinds of assessments, students do not have to worry about their grades being entirely determined by one type of assignment that might not be their strong suit. That said, my classes fail the "easy A" metric. I set the bar high, and when students are not reaching it, I do everything I can to empower them to do better. As a rule, I leave open 3-5 class days a semester to try different learning exercises, ideas, and techniques. Incorporating new, and changing old, instruction methods should be evidence-based. One crucial source of that evidence is students' testimony about what best helps them learn. Accordingly, I take student evaluations and feedback seriously and will adjust my teaching strategies in the direction the evidence points. For example, after some students' evaluations revealed to me that they get more benefit out of discussing their paper topics and ideas than giving and receiving written feedback on rough drafts, I started incorporating one or two paper workshop days into the class schedule.

As a member of an underrepresented group in academia, I prioritize making my classes a safe space for inclusivity and diversity. I want my classes to provide a welcoming teaching environment for all students. To this end, on the first day of class I require that the students come up with a list of strategies that they think will encourage both critical thinking and respectful dialogue in the classroom, and I make all students sign a pledge stating that they, as individuals, agree to abide by the classroom rules we have set. I hold all students accountable for following these rules and will refer back to the list and signed pledge if a student breaks them. Genuine philosophical progress is the result of embracing the diversity [that results from] socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and cultural differences. Thus, when developing my syllabi, I incorporate research done by and topics relevant to underrepresented groups in academia. Philosophy courses often include topics that are especially difficult, like racial and sexual violence. I explain to my students that philosophers often present cases involving terrible harms in an abstract and sterile way, which has the *supposed* advantage of making the relevant issues clearer but the decided disadvantage of sometimes seeming to trivialize or normalize matters that are anything but trivial or normal. I tell students that my door is always open to anyone who has concerns about [any elements of a course,] and that I am willing to help and make adjustments if there is a way that I can work with them [to make things easier to bear.] Full and equitable participation requires that the class material is accessible for all students. One effective strategy I've found is working with students' individually to rewrite the argument from a paper in

their own words. Because most of the canonical pieces in philosophy are written by white males, I've discovered that using a student's own vernacular to give an argument helps them feel empowered to engage in some of these difficult topics.

Teaching is important to me, not merely because it is rewarding to see students improve, but because it is a large part of how I continue to learn. Notice in describing my class format and methods I refer to "we", me and the students. We do philosophy together to figure out what is most reasonable for us to think and believe. The concepts we define, and the arguments we make, are the tools by which we understand ourselves and the world around us. As I've learned through my own experience, they shape how and what we think and thereby determine what we can do and who we can be. It is my intent and hope that the commitment to critical analysis I cultivate and encourage in the classroom instills in students a life-long drive to reason philosophically about all their life choices and endeavors.