

Teaching Statement

Jared A. Millson

This Fall, I began teaching remotely at California State University, Bakersfield (CSUB). For eight years prior to that, I taught philosophy courses at Agnes Scott College (ASC), an extremely diverse liberal arts college for women in metro Atlanta. Since I have only just begun my teaching at CSUB, I will focus on the pedagogical lessons I've learned and strategies I've developed during my time at ASC. Although Agnes Scott's history and population are somewhat unique, teaching philosophy is much the same there as it is elsewhere. In what follows, I'll discuss two particular challenges that most philosophy instructors face at undergraduate institutions and describe the ways I've responded to them.

The first of these challenges is to make philosophy an inclusive and accessible discipline, one that is open and inviting to students whose identities have not been well represented in the field historically or who, for a variety of reasons, might not consider taking classes in the major despite nascent interest and ability. (As someone who identifies as physically disabled and whose twin brother is intellectually disabled, I have a limited yet very personal sense of the importance of accessible education.) One of the obstacles to accessibility and inclusion is the fact that undergraduates rarely have prior exposure to philosophy; many view it as "too abstract," with dim job prospects, and, consequently, as a major for the well-off. Much of my work both as an instructor and as chair of the department has been to dispel this misconception. I describe aspects of this work below. Since the median enrollment in our courses and the number of philosophy majors both increased dramatically during this time, I suspect that some of my efforts had an effect.

At the curricular level, I have developed original offerings that tap into and leverage students' interests and backgrounds to motivate the often difficult and unfamiliar activity of philosophy. The idea is to demonstrate how seemingly obscure and rarefied philosophical debates bear on issues with which students are already concerned and engaged. I regularly teach a course that introduces students to contemporary issues in epistemology (e.g. the nature of expert testimony, the social dimensions of cognition, and the role that practical considerations play in knowledge acquisition/attribution) via an examination of conspiracy theories and our responses to them. In that course, students collectively design and implement a wiki that contains a curated database of putative conspiracy theories and corresponding entries aimed at determining whether each is in fact a conspiracy theory and what our cognitive attitude toward it ought to be. Not only does the course develop students' digital literacy, it also demonstrates the relevance of (applied) epistemology to issues in popular culture, such as the rise of a so-called "post-truth" society.

I have also taught a course that looks at epistemic practices and epistemological theories in Non-Western contexts, specifically West African, Indian, and Indigenous American. We look at recent work in experimental philosophy and ethno-epistemology that might de-center

and provincialize the assumptions, methods, and problems associated with Western epistemology. We contrast, for instance, the orthodox account of “knows” in English with linguistic analyses of epistemic verbs in Non-European languages. This course sprung from discussions with students in other epistemology courses who raised concerns about Western bias and Eurocentrism. My response was to offer a course that spoke to these concerns.

Yet another course of mine covers fundamental issues in philosophy of language through the lens of recent literature on pejorative expressions—in particular, slurs. Students are introduced to a host of linguistic phenomena (e.g. presupposition, implicature, projection, embedding) and distinctions (e.g. extension v.s. intension, character v.s. content, reporting v.s. expressing, force v.s. meaning) and then use these concepts to describe the behaviors of slurs and to evaluate their purported explanations. The impetus for this course came from ongoing conversations about safe spaces and free speech policies that students, administrators, and faculty are engaging in on campus. I describe some of the challenges involved in teaching this course below, but for the moment I mention it as yet another example of a course that makes philosophy exciting and relevant to students with diverse interests and backgrounds. The courses I have described were among the most popular at ASC, with sections routinely at or above enrollment capacity, and became the source of many new majors.

At the instructional level, I am careful to provide students with texts and media from a range of sources and styles. As most of my students have difficulty meeting the auxiliary expenses of their education, I never require students to purchase texts and instead make use of my institution’s multimedia databases, or, in the case of my logic courses, I provide them with my open-source textbook. I select readings that are largely contemporary (published in the past 30 years), cross-referential, and representative of diverse authorial perspectives. In my course on the philosophy of pejorative language, for instance, many of the texts are articles whose authors (most of whom are women or people of color) comment on and criticize each others’ arguments. Such texts provide students with an example of philosophical debate among diverse thinkers. Occasionally, I will assign a text that I deem sub-par and use it as an opportunity to model potential pitfalls in argumentation. This has the added benefit of shattering the illusion many students suffer that “if it’s published, it must be correct/good/authoritative.” In the classroom, we engage these texts through learning activities and small-group exercises that ask students to *do* what I want them to learn: e.g. to analyze or criticize an argument, to apply a set of concepts to a concrete problem, to articulate and evaluate their own assumptions on a topic. Often we’ll organize debates, create games, role-play, construct a class wiki, and even share memes. These pedagogical and curricular choices help to dispel the myth that philosophy is a peculiar pastime of the privileged and to promote it as an inclusive activity that students can see themselves doing.

Fostering inclusion and accessibility also means meeting students where they are in their development of key philosophical skills, such as critical reading and argumentation. Unlike their views on ethical and political matters, students rarely have even rudimentary epistemological or metaphysical positions. This is just one of the reasons why debates in these areas typically baffle and intimidate new students. Criticizing, let alone *constructing* arguments on

such topics often seems overwhelming. In recognition of this, I take a scaffolding approach to the development of these skills, both within courses and across course levels, that focuses on the acquisition of more fundamental skills—e.g. effective note-taking and highlighting, accurate identification of arguments, faithful reconstructions—before proceeding to that of more complex ones—e.g. the evaluation and construction of arguments, the art of posing objections and hypothesizing replies. To provide an environment in which students are comfortable taking dialectical and intellectual risks, the number of assignments in my courses far outstrips the number required for course completion; this enables students to try, fail, and try again, without fear of irreparably compromising their final grade. In some courses, I also use what I call an *à la carte* grade-composition system that customizes students' learning experience by asking them to determine which skills they need to work on and which assignments are best suited to do so. I have found that structuring assignments and grading in this way makes the honing of philosophical skills far more manageable and hence less daunting for students.

The second challenge that I have devoted particular attention to is that of getting students to take ownership of their education. Minimally, this requires that students understand and value the course's learning objectives. At the start of every course, class meeting, activity, or assignment I explain precisely what skills we are looking to develop and how that course, meeting, activity, or assignment aims to do so. We discuss the value of these skills, how they contribute to both our proximate and distal goals, and how they might be deployed across various contexts.

But taking responsibility for one's education is not just a matter of seeing one's efforts as worthwhile; students should also play a role in the formation of their own learning experiences. In its more basic manifestation, this self-direction involves the solicitations of feedback on activities and assignments—either during class discussion or in out-of-class, sometimes anonymous, communication—that is then explicitly incorporated into the design of future activities. Another, more involved form of self-direction occurs when students actively shape features of the course. Having the opportunity and responsibility to modify a course reading list, or to design a policy of classroom conduct, or to design new activities and assignments empowers and motivates students. What follows are some concrete examples of how I do this.

A perennial difficulty that instructors face is to ensure that their students prepare adequately for class meetings. After a few years spent experimenting with different strategies of getting students to complete their assigned readings, I realized that this challenge is as much theirs as it is mine. So, I began having students brainstorm assignments that would keep them accountable for the day's reading. In some classes, we decided to make one student (in rotation) responsible for creating a series of multiple choice and short answer questions that all students would complete using the college's learning management system (Moodle, Canvas, etc.) before coming to class. In other courses, students decided to make the quality of class discussion the primary locus of accountability. In those cases, students briefly evaluate others' contributions to the discussion, as well as their own, at the close of each class. These are just some of the ways that students decided to take ownership of (this aspect of) their education. I now begin courses by having students choose from among these student-designed activities,

while also giving them the opportunity to create new ones. Sometimes we try a few different activities during the first two weeks before settling on one for the remainder of the semester. It is hard to overstate the results of this approach. Not only are most students now prepared for class, but they also keep each other accountable for this preparation.

In my course on slurs and pejoratives, I faced a more unique challenge. I found myself, a 30-something straight white man, teaching a course on racist, sexist, and homophobic language to a class composed primarily of young women of color and LGBTQ students. In order to probe the explanatory power of the linguistic theories we were examining, we would have to work with examples that pumped the right intuitions, namely those of offense and derogation. At the same time, given my privilege, I was clearly not in a position to decide which slurs to work with. So, I turned the decision over to my students. At our very first meeting, I tasked students with drafting a provisional policy governing the utterance of pejorative expressions. This policy would address which slurs would be spoken in class, which would be written, who could speak/write them, how students would communicate their objections or concerns about the use of particular slurs, and what consequences (if any) there would be for violation of the policy. At subsequent meetings, students were asked to reassess this policy, to offer suggestions on whether and how to revise it, and to raise concerns about its implementation. In our final meeting, we reflected on the success and limitations of this policy, as well as on its potential application to other contexts and institutional settings—the last of these fed directly into the course’s examination of so-called “hate speech” policies. In effect, students took responsibility for instituting and administering their own safe space.

In describing my responses to the challenges of accessibility and accountability, I’ve sought to show you how I deal with teaching challenges more broadly. I have no illusions about these pedagogical successes. Teaching is hard. It’s always a work in progress. Being good at it means being attentive to the needs and interests of one’s students and adapting accordingly. I hope to have given you some sense of how I do this.