

TEACHING STATEMENT

In a class on Plato's *Republic*, a student said, "Socrates does kind of what you do to us; like him, you ask us questions, and force us to think about what we are saying." I was delighted to hear this, for in his method Socrates is a feminist. He begins from the knowledge of his interlocutors, but brings them to see its radical consequences. This is my approach to class discussion, one of the three pedagogical methods I use in the classroom. In addition, I use two other methods to enhance the benefits of discussion and complement its shortcomings: short lectures and written assignments.

I organize class discussions in a way that reflects my belief that the best learning takes place in non-hierarchical settings. To create such a setting, I give students opportunities to start class discussion from their interests. I believe this motivates them to participate and take charge of their learning. For instance, I require them to write a question about the reading for each class on the online discussion board, and I bring up these questions in class. In the second half of the class they are able to bring their voices and interests to the classroom by making short presentations about an aspect of the text.

Discussion is a non-hierarchical learning method also because it shows students that they already have political and philosophical views, and that they can defend them. Moreover, by participating in class discussions students come to see the pleasures they can take in making this type of argument and rejoice in their abilities. In the first class, before assigning any reading, I break up the class into groups of 3-4 students and ask each group to discuss one of the questions that structure the entire course. Some of the questions I asked in the past are:

- Should we obey laws? What about unjust laws, such as Jim Crow laws?
- Should men and women be allowed and prepared to do the same activities, or do they have different roles in society?
- In principle, can human beings live in isolation from other human beings?

Discussion also offers students a critical opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills while being confronted with views other than their own. In discussion, students learn to articulate their views by relating them to the views of others, supporting them with reasons and defending them in full-blown arguments. To achieve these habits of mind I try to model them in my own way of conducting discussion. I listen to students' comments carefully, allowing them space to develop their thoughts. I make my comments in relation to theirs, making their points more specific and showing their relevance for the issue under discussion. I challenge students to get better at this sort of discussion by asking them to develop their views, to do so in relation to the texts or views expressed in class and to support them with reasons.

As part of my non-hierarchical class discussion structure, I make my teaching methods and goals for each class known to students, a strategy that helps them take charge of their learning. To create this type of transparency, I start class by setting a clear set of questions meant to structure the discussion. I then involve students in the process of conducting class. I ask them to choose the question with which we should start, and empower them to make comments not only about the content of our discussion, but also about this process.

Yet I am also open about the ways in which my own research interests and political commitments are reflected in the questions I bring to the discussion. For instance, when I teach canonical texts in the history of social and political thought, as I did as a Harper Fellow, I emphasize the ways they treat “marginal” figures – women, colonized people, people of color – and neglected subjects, such as gender and sexuality. This method has pedagogical value, I found, because attention to these issues empowers students from historically marginalized groups to speak in class and to think systematically about issues that affect their lives but that are rarely reflected in mainstream discourses. Moreover, these discussions give all students theoretical tools that enable them to discuss constructively issues of racial and gender justice, tools without which they might avoid discussion of these issues. I further encourage this approach to learning by illustrating abstract conceptual issues with concrete examples of social inequality. Thus, my students have discussed constitutional issues raised by land dispossessions of Native American tribes, policing, racial and gender equality, the legal regulation of the family, school funding, etc. I often add TV series or movies to the class readings to make vivid the problems behind abstract philosophical theories and because discussing them against the theoretical background of the class readings helps students become thoughtful, critical consumers of their society’s cultural products.

My second pedagogical method is the short lecture. I use it to complement class discussion and build on its benefits, because I learnt from their evaluations that students find an entirely Socratic discussion disorienting. To give them more substantive guidance in their learning I offer short lectures focusing on a particular concept or idea. A short lecture also allows me to make connections between ideas students have already reconstructed, to emphasize their significance and draw out their implications. In my experience, this empowers students to articulate their thoughts more clearly, and helps them to see the connections between their ideas and the problems discussed.

In teaching a large lecture class I would build on this lecturing experience. Moreover, I would structure my lectures in response to students’ voices and interests. I would continue to require them to write questions about the readings on the online discussion board and encourage them to comment on each other’s questions. I would also pursue the same type of transparency about the methods and goals of the class. And I would use the small group discussion on a specific question and the occasional class debate, which students would have to prepare in advance.

Thirdly, I assign several written assignments because writing argumentative papers is an important skill I want my students to acquire. Writing also allows students to deepen the understanding they acquired during class discussion, and encourages them to develop the rigor and originality of their thinking. To lower-division students I give a very short written assignment in week two or three of the course, to allow enough time for students to benefit from my feedback and to practice several times. For upper-division students I assign a mid-term paper and a final research paper, for which they have to conduct independent research. To guide them through this process, I assign a paper proposal that includes a tentative bibliography and a description of the question they plan to write about.

The feedback students give and receive is essential to completing their learning of the course material and developing their writing skills. On their papers they receive my comments and, once a quarter, feedback from one of their colleagues. Peer-evaluation improves their writing in two ways. First, it gives them a different type of feedback than mine. Secondly, by putting them in the role of the reader, it makes them more reflective about their writing. To further encourage self-reflection about their writing I ask them to fill out a self-evaluation form about their final papers. Students receive a grade for the peer-evaluation they provide, which rewards serious, specific and constructive criticism. They do not receive a grade for the self-evaluation.

Using these three methods simultaneously helps students build on their knowledge, learn from each other while improving their skills for critical discussion and argumentative writing. At the same time, they become more aware of their learning and take responsibility for it.