1.3 Teaching statement

As a philosophy instructor, I try to show people how to think philosophically. I show them what good philosophy looks like in my teaching techniques and in the readings I choose. I guide them through the analysis of classical philosophical problems. I help them practice the discipline of writing and evaluating arguments with care and precision.

The activity of philosophical thinking itself is exciting, surprising, and widely applicable. This is a fortunate thing, and I try to use it to my advantage. I remember one class in which that wide applicability was expressed in a question dear to the hearts of the sports-loving students of Pittsburgh.

"How about those head injuries in the NFL?" asked a student.

The NFL had recently found that professional American football players are more likely to develop Alzheimer's Disease. I encouraged the students to look for the philosophy in this question. Does the correlation imply that playing football *causes* Alzheimer's? To what does the term "Alzheimer's" *refer*, and how does it come to do so? Is a football player's *identity* the same before and after developing Alzheimer's? After the chat, one student exclaimed, "Is there anything that *doesn't* involve philosophy?"

Unfortunately, this kind of natural curiosity in students often lacks the rigor and depth that comes with good philosophical thinking. I consider myself a trainer in rigor and depth, in teaching the techniques and content of classic arguments in professional philosophy. The trouble is to present that material in a way that connects with the students. How do we get them to engage?

This is a central and difficult challenge for the teacher. Sometimes your attempts go smoothly, and other times they fall flat. But if you're flexible enough, the students may surprise you by engaging with the material in a completely unexpected way. One example came up in my Principles of Scientific Reasoning class on the material conditional. Love it or hate it, the material conditional can be a real headache to teach. There I was, standing in front of the class, happily executing my carefully crafted introduction to deductive systems. The students were interested, asking questions, and having fun, and I just kept building off of their energy – when suddenly, the train came to a screeching halt. I had just written down the following truth table.

A	B	$A \to B$
T	T	T
T	F	F
F	T	T
F	F	T

The students were happy with the first two rows. But they weren't buying the last two. Why, they asked, should $A \to B$ be true when A is false, regardless of the value of B? I tried some classic examples on them. I tried suggesting they think of it as a convention. Nothing was working. I began to have that dreaded feeling that the energy was about to dissipate from the room.

I decided to completely shift gears. Instead of arguing with the students, I embraced their skepticism, and tried a little experiment. I had the students fix the first two lines of the truth table, and then write down all the possible values for the second two lines. There are four.

A	B	1	2	3	4
T	T	T	T	T	T
T	F	F	F	F	F
F	T	T	F	F	T
F	F	F	T	F	T

Putting the students into small groups, I asked them to try to find problems with three of the four possible columns. Within a few minutes, one group had found that the first column is *trivial*, in that it just repeats the truth values of B. So, assuming the truth assignment of $A \rightarrow B$ can be different from that of B, column 1 can be eliminated. With a little guidance, they soon realized further that the second and third columns have an undesirable symmetry property; namely, they remain invariant under the interchange of the A and B cells. So, assuming that the '$\rightarrow$' is *asymmetric*, in that the truth assignment of $A \rightarrow B$ can differ from that of $B \rightarrow A$, columns 2 and 3 can be eliminated as well. This leaves only one option: the truth assignment of $A \rightarrow B$ must be column 4, as is standardly assumed. The students found this surprising, but expressed renewed confidence about the material.

The example illustrates two features of my approach to teaching that I think are important. First, I communicate with the students, and when the class isn't working for them, I do my best to adapt in a way that better suits their needs. Second, when the class material might be viewed as "technical," I work hard to present it in an accessible way. I'm always looking for new ways to help students make connections to material that is otherwise difficult, and I believe I've had some success. The Principles of Scientific Reasoning course required me to introduce deductive systems and probabilistic reasoning, in a poorly lit classroom, from 6-8:30pm. Nevertheless, I believe I kept the class accessible and exciting, and was in the end very pleased with my teaching evaluations (they can be found in Section 2, Roberts 0611).

The content and experience of philosophical thinking is compelling and difficult. It is also immensely rewarding when it is mastered. I want my students to share that rewarding feeling. I want them to be struck with curiosity about the underpinnings of the world around them, and then to investigate their questions with rigor and care. My teachers presented the practice of philosophy to me in its most exciting, challenging, and fulfilling form, and for that I am very grateful. When I teach philosophy, I try my best to do the same.