Statement of Teaching Philosophy

When I was growing up, my mother was fond of copying passages from books and posting them on the refrigerator. One passage, excerpted from John Henry Newman, explained why she wanted her children to go to college. *"A university training,"* it said, *"is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society. It is the education which gives us a clear conscious view of our own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them and a force in urging them."* I went to college with the hope of furthering this great ordinary end. I teach so that I can help others advance towards the same goal. I doubt the world needs more professional philosophers, but it certainly needs more professionals who can think philosophically. Done rightly, my teaching should prepare students for the active work of life.

My teaching combines close textual analysis, student-led discussion, and Socratic questioning. I create assignments that develop fundamental skills (writing, logical reasoning, and public speaking), assess comprehension of the material, and help students make connections between the texts and the wider world. This is standard stuff, I imagine. A distinct feature of my teaching is an explicit interest in the democratic role of virtue. A virtuous society requires virtuous citizens; virtuous citizens are developed by a virtuous society. Education is how we square this circle. A democratic society needs citizens who are literate and numerate. It also needs citizens who are courageous, temperate, and generous. Effective self-governance begins with learning to effectively govern the self.

Teaching can promote virtue without pushing a particular set of moral or political values. The process starts with curriculum selection. It takes fortitude and humility to work through Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* or Arendt's *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*. Watching a YouTube "crash course" might give you the same knowledge content, but it won't make you a more excellent human being.

Social virtues can be cultivated through intentional class design. When we analyze and evaluate Arendt's claims about the role of the masses in totalitarian systems, I tell students that my only role is to moderate discussion. This allows them to take responsibility for their education and that of their peers. It requires them to practice speaking and listening. They learn to share insights, dissent with respect, and advance towards a common goal even if collective agreement is elusive. In short, they find themselves acting out some of the features of an engaged citizenry that they are reading about in Arendt, and perhaps experiencing the threat that free thinking poses to the mass control that they are discussing. It takes time for students to get good at these classes, underscoring the point that virtue is a skill requiring practice.

Aspiring leaders must recognize that our words and actions advance arguments and visions of the good life that touch on fundamental human questions. Clear thinking about age-old debates and engagement with perennial problems, such as the inevitability of faction or the existence of evil, is not ivory tower frivolity – it is the foundation of an examined life and informed citizenship. To this end, my teaching builds bridges between the timeless and the timely. We might explore the problem of factions in civil society by comparing Plato's views in *Republic* book III and Madison's views in *Federalist* 10, followed by a discussion of contemporary political "echo chambers." In

philosophy of religion, Augustine's response to the problem of evil is joined with Darwinian concerns about natural suffering and neuroscientific perspectives on the possibility of choice. There is intrinsic value in studying seminal texts for their depth of insight and historical influence. There is instrumental value in using them to inform contemporary conversations about political factionalism, free will, and responsibility.

I sometimes tell students, jokingly, that I don't care what they think. By this I mean that I'm not worried about the conclusions they reach. My chief interest is with the reasoning and argumentation they use to support their conclusions. Like civil discourse, recognizing and creating effective arguments is a skill that must be cultivated. When I teach logic, I introduce truth tables, quantification, and formal fallacies. Students also learn to identify arguments in ordinary language by translating famous speeches into premise-conclusion form and attempting to test for validity (e.g., Lincoln's second inaugural, Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own"). Logic is a human practice, not merely a technique for programing software. Reasonable people are those who know both the scope and limits of logical analysis.

Finally, I build curriculum using Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. The point of inclusive teaching is not to impugn canonical thinkers or cancel canonical texts; rather, the goal is to present ideas and authors that give all students the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the curriculum (mirrors), encounter others (windows), and negotiate respectful interaction between the familiar and the unfamiliar (sliding glass doors). We become better thinkers when we avail ourselves of new voices and alternative narratives.