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Teaching Statement

An animating ideal for me as a teacher is the notion that good teachers play a key role in helping students to become more reflective, and thus more productive, people. With that ideal in mind, one of my primary goals is to help students see their ideas as works in progress, as potential contributions to others' lives even if they are not yet quite right. For this to happen, students must feel encouraged to share ideas in class, even when those ideas are untested, vague, or provisional.

To foster cooperative revision of ideas, I have designed activities that involve students defending their own provisional views in writing, then passing their work to other students who refine or supplement that view, whether or not they share it. Alternatively, sometimes I ask each student to object to another student's view and then have a third student respond to the objection. These activities show students that they can strengthen their own positions through collaboration and allow me to explain how to credit others who have contributed to their thinking. Another of my strategies to portray classroom activities as joint efforts to learn is to regularly give credit to students by name for their participation in class, while asking others to build on the contribution by saying something like, "Who would like to expand on X's interesting idea about Y?"

A second of my main goals is to help students express their ideas in the clearest, most persuasive way they can, especially in their written work. This prepares students to engage with the arguments they encounter in class and in public discourse, a benefit that accrues to students regardless of their majors. I employ multiple specific strategies to improve my students' writing.

For example, I assign students to reflect carefully upon the comments they have received on previous assignments and to write down specific writing goals, appropriate to their skill level, before turning in each paper. In my experience, these self-imposed goals significantly decrease the frequency with which students make similar mistakes multiple times. It also encourages students to ask me for individual help in developing strategies for achieving their goals. One student identified his greatest challenge as writing the first few words on a blank screen or page. After discussing what was difficult about starting a written assignment, it became clear that he is more comfortable expressing himself verbally. So I recommended that he call his voice mail and leave a message for himself describing what he was going to write, then transcribe the message. He later told me that this strategy was so helpful that he was using it in other classes as well.

More recently, after noticing that many of my students need more help learning to read closely and actively to absorb content and to prepare for critical engagement, I set myself another goal. I am now developing ways to demonstrate to students the value of close reading, to show that it is a skill within their reach, and to give them the tools needed to form the habit of reading actively.

I believe that this requires more direct reference to textual passages than I have previously incorporated in my lesson plans. I now explicitly praise any student who asks a question or makes a comment in class that directly refers to the text, applauding the way such a contribution directs our focus. I hope that by modeling active reading in class, my students will begin to see that careful reading is part of the best philosophical practice. I am also creating more assignments that require students to respond to particular passages from assigned texts. By continuing to set new goals and to identify the means by which I can achieve them, I hold myself accountable for my progress as a teacher, just as I hold students accountable for their progress as philosophers.