Teaching Statement  
Miles Tucker

My fundamental goal as a teacher is to create an environment where the students and I are thinking—and learning—together. There are so many things that can contribute to this. Some are small: we have class debates on fundamental issues; I use the chalkboard, rather than power point, so that the students can see me working and thinking with them. Others are more significant: I focus on readings that are concise and evocative. I expect mastery of the relevant doctrines; we work through our readings slowly, hoping to understand every paragraph and every argument. The students and I then extract the arguments and, working together, break down the position advanced into its fundamental parts.

During this process, discussion is vital. I expect every student to develop the ability to critically evaluate arguments. I am especially eager for my students to present objections to the proposals our authors advance. To facilitate this, I try to make the implausible seem plausible, whether it’s by defending a naïve version of act utilitarianism, or Tolstoy’s expressionist theory of art. I find that the more energy I put into supporting these views and arguments, the more energy my students put into refuting them. I take great satisfaction every time a student dreams up a now famous objection or—even better—develops a criticism I have never considered. But this process is not only negative: I make time for us to think carefully about how we might improve the views we challenge.

I also encourage my students to see themselves as young philosophers—and to develop the ability to present and defend substantive positions. I often try to achieve this by assigning a substantive research project. First, the students pick a topic that they’re excited about and we meet to discuss how best to proceed. Often I’ll ask the student to narrow their focus (many propose works closer in scope to a dissertation), or shift their topic slightly. Next, they compose a topic proposal, where they summarize the puzzle they’ll engage with, the literature they’ll discuss, the arguments they’ll consider, and the position they hope to defend. We often meet again afterwards to talk about just how to compose their manuscript. Some students will correspond with me frequently via email as they compose their work; others prefer to work independently. Finally, they draft and submit their essay.

After, I ask my students to give a brief presentation on the topic they’ve chosen to write about. I hope that they can display some of the expertise they have quietly developed throughout the semester. The presentations are carefully structured: each student is required to develop a handout and, if there is time, we close with a brief question and answer period.

I hope the students will see the class as a community. Again, some of my actions to promote this are small: I try to memorize my students’ names as quickly as possible; I explain that, like them, I am still learning—and will always be learning as long as I am a philosopher. I also impress that I am eager to talk about philosophy with my students: whether this is over email, after class, during office hours, or by appointment (or in fact, any time I’m in my office). I am especially delighted when students drop by long after our course is over so that we can think together, and chat about the new puzzles they’re grappling with.