

# Teaching Portfolio

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## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Teaching Statement</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Student Evaluations</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1	Quantitative Summary . . . . .	4
2.2	Quantitative Evaluations: Summer 2017 . . . . .	4
2.3	Quantitative Evaluations: Spring 2016 . . . . .	5
<b>3</b>	<b>Complete, unedited student comments</b>	<b>6</b>

# 1 Teaching Statement

Two defining characteristics of philosophical thinking are critically examining one's own views while charitably examining the views of others. As an instructor, I want to engage students in a way that encourages this type of thinking.

But there is a puzzle: when one considers the most obvious models for engaging an audience, they seem to discourage critical and charitable thinking. For example, Marc Antony's speech at Caesar's funeral ("I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. . .") is very exciting. But its aim is to manipulate the beliefs of its audience, not to encourage its audience to form their own beliefs. Similarly, many politicians are skilled in riling up their base on the campaign trail. But these speeches are stirring because they appeal to beliefs that constituents already have, not because they encourage charity towards other views.

So in my teaching, I take inspiration from a very different type of model: a solo theater performance. Just as a solo actor switches roles between multiple characters, so too I try to switch between different points of view when leading discussions in class. For example, in a class on Berkeley's idealism, I pretend to be Hylas and then Philonous, thereby making the case for and against idealism as strong as possible. Similarly, when leading a class on the problem of evil, I pretend to be an atheist and then pretend to be a theist, developing a dialogue between these views. (Of course, since students are also contributing, we should think of the analogy as a solo performance where the "fourth wall" is broken down).

For many students, observing this "one person show" leads to an important realization. Whereas the goal originally seemed to be to defend one's antecedently-held beliefs, students now recognize that the goal is to develop competing arguments as rigorously as possible. I reinforce this realization in my course's assessments, structuring them so that students argue both sides in a debate. For example, a typical prompt might require students (i) to decide whether they think free will is compatible with determinism, (ii) to present the strongest argument in favor of that view, and (iii) to present the strongest objection to that argument.

Notice that, in the above prompt, students must end their paper with an objection to their own view. Students often ask whether they can make one additional move in the dialectic so that they can defend their view from this objection. But at least in the first half of the term, I tell students to leave the paper as it is, making sure they recognize that the paper is not supposed to settle the issue once and for all. I have found that, freed from the burden of having to give the last word in a debate, it is much easier for students to develop the arguments impartially. From course evaluations, I think this type of assignment structure is an effective way to encourage students to think charitably about other views.

To further encourage critical and charitable thinking, I typically begin class with a five to ten minute "warm-up". This warm-up may be an activity, a thought experiment, or a series of polls; it is designed to be provocative in a way that encourages students to work out their own view on the day's topic. For example, in a class on altruism, I give students black and red playing cards symbolizing 'Cooperate' and 'Defect' which they use to play different versions of Prisoner's Dilemma games. Since a small amount of extra credit is at stake, this exercise prompts students to think through their views

on self-interest and cooperation. Similarly, I begin my early modern course by informing students that they are simulations within the Matrix, defending this view from all of their objections. This exercise sets the tone for the class, prompting students to question their basic beliefs about the external world and their relation to it.

One of my students wrote in their course evaluation: “I plan on remaining in contact with [Robert] and seeking him out as a mentor/resource when I have questions about my own independent philosophy reading, which I will now be doing because of the inspiration I’ve gained...” I appreciated this comment because I want to encourage students to make philosophical thinking a larger part of their life. I am proud that at least ten of my students have gone on to major in philosophy after taking one of my introductory courses. One of these students recently called to tell me that he would be attending graduate school in philosophy.

I have also been glad to see my students thinking philosophically in other areas of their life. For example, one former student recently came to my office to talk about an ethical dilemma confronting his character in an online role-playing game. We discussed how his avatar’s choice resembled various ethical cases we discussed in class. Another former student told me how, years later, our discussions about the problem of evil continued to shape his understanding of his religious faith. This is my main goal as an instructor: to help students to think critically and charitably in the many different areas of their lives.

### **Diversity**

I am glad that St. Norbert values dialogue with diverse cultures, perspectives, and beliefs, as outlined in the mission statement. Below, I describe my approaches to encouraging diversity both in the classroom specifically and in the philosophy department more generally.

*Diversity in the classroom:* One way I encourage inclusiveness in the classroom is through the readings and topics included on my syllabi. To this end, my syllabi feature readings from members of groups who are underrepresented in philosophy (see syllabi below for examples). In addition, I try to include topics in my courses that address issues relating to gender, race, class, and disability. For example, my introductory epistemology course features a unit on feminist epistemology. My bioethics class features feminist discussions of surrogacy, medicalization, and commodification (as well as critiques from disability studies). Similarly, in my philosophy of language course, I have students apply the conceptual resources learned in the course to analyze philosophical issues relating to slurs.

I also try to make the classroom more inclusive through the *structure* of my lectures. Above, I described the solo theater performance model I use when leading classroom discussion. One further advantage of this model is that it helps make the classroom a non-threatening environment where students feel comfortable testing out their own beliefs and ideas. I also present the course material in three formats: lecturing, Socratic dialogue, and handouts. These different formats are designed to benefit students with different learning styles and different learning behaviors.

Another strategy I follow to make my courses more inclusive is to have students complete mid-semester evaluations. In these evaluations, I ask students about what they appreciate about the course, ways the course could be improved, etc. With this feedback, I am able to adjust the course to help improve students’ learning outcomes.

*Diversity in the department:* In graduate school, I helped design and implement a comprehensive climate survey for the UNC-CH philosophy department. This survey collected detailed information on climate, inclusiveness, and diversity in the department. My responsibilities included meeting with a social scientist and the UNC Ombuds Office to design questions, working with IT staff to design the survey itself, and analyzing the survey results. I am glad to say that this analysis was included in the UNC philosophy department's 10-year departmental review.

At UNC, I served as a panelist for a teaching workshop that focused on how to lead inclusive classroom discussions. I have also completed training offered by UNC's LGBTQ Center to be an effective ally for my LGBTQ students. I have also volunteered as a tutor for several members of underrepresented groups.

## 2 Student Evaluations

### 2.1 Quantitative Summary

I have taught twelve classes at UNC, eight as a full instructor and four as a teaching assistant. Over this time, my student evaluation averages have been higher than departmental (and university) averages on *every item measured*. The following table summarizes the results from these evaluations. All items are measured on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Course/Instructor Characteristics	My Avg.	UNC Dept. Avg.
Overall, this instructor was an effective teacher.	4.44	4.12
Overall, this course was excellent.	4.00	3.85
Overall, I learned a great deal from this course.	4.11	4.05
The instructor showed enthusiasm for teaching this class.	4.70	4.51
The instructor showed enthusiasm for the subject matter.	4.76	4.58
The instructor expressed ideas clearly.	4.43	4.17
The instructor treated all students with respect.	4.72	4.73
The instructional techniques engaged me with the subject.	4.43	4.01
The instructor showed concern about students learning.	4.41	4.23
The assignments helped me better understand the subject.	4.30	4.13
The instructor provided me with helpful feedback.	4.09	4.02
I was able to get individual help when I needed it.	4.53	4.31
This course was exciting to me intellectually.	4.00	3.85
The instructor evaluated my work fairly.	4.39	4.21
This course challenged me to think deeply.	4.44	4.35

### 2.2 Quantitative Evaluations: Summer 2017

In the next two sub-sections, I provide specific quantitative data from the evaluations from recent classes. In Summer 2017, I was the instructor of record for PHIL 165: Bioethics. In this course, my student evaluation averages were higher than departmental (and university) averages on *every item measured*. All items are measured on a

scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

<b>Course/Instructor Characteristics</b>	<b>My Avg.</b>	<b>Dept. Avg.</b>
Overall, this instructor was an effective teacher.	4.73	4.12
Overall, this course was excellent.	4.67	3.85
Overall, I learned a great deal from this course.	4.67	4.05
The instructor showed enthusiasm for teaching this class.	4.87	4.51
The instructor showed enthusiasm for the subject.	4.93	4.58
The instructor expressed ideas clearly.	4.87	4.17
The instructor treated all students with respect.	4.93	4.58
The instructional techniques engaged me with the subject.	4.67	4.01
The instructor showed concern about students learning.	4.74	4.23
The assignments helped me better understand the subject.	4.80	4.13
I was able to get individual help when I needed it.	4.87	4.02
This course was exciting to me intellectually.	4.80	4.31
This course challenged me to think deeply.	4.93	3.85
The instructor clearly communicated what was expected of me.	4.73	4.21
The course materials helped me better understand the subject.	4.40	4.35

### 2.3 Quantitative Evaluations: Spring 2016

In Spring 2016, I was the instructor of record for PHIL 220: Early Modern Philosophy. In this course, my student evaluation averages were higher than departmental (and university) averages on *every item measured*. All items are measured on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

<b>Course/Instructor Characteristics</b>	<b>My Avg.</b>	<b>Dept. Avg.</b>
Overall, this instructor was an effective teacher.	4.64	4.12
Overall, this course was excellent.	4.48	3.85
Overall, I learned a great deal from this course.	4.44	4.05
The instructor showed enthusiasm for teaching this class.	4.96	4.51
The instructor showed enthusiasm for the subject matter.	4.76	4.58
The instructor expressed ideas clearly.	4.76	4.17
The instructor treated all students with respect.	4.84	4.58
The instructional techniques engaged me with the subject.	4.80	4.01
The instructor showed concern about students learning.	4.72	4.23
The assignments helped me better understand the subject.	4.64	4.13
I was able to get individual help when I needed it.	4.67	4.02
This course was exciting to me intellectually.	4.56	4.31

This course challenged me to think deeply.	4.64	3.85
The instructor clearly communicated what was expected of me.	4.80	4.21
The course materials helped me better understand the subject.	4.64	4.35

### 3 Complete, unedited student comments

The comments provided below are complete and unedited (except when needed to protect anonymity).

#### 1. PHIL 411: Time & Space (Spring 2017)

-this was a great class. My favorite i've ever taken. 1/1

-I'm a freshman and since I got to Duke I was sure I wanted to major in neuroscience. I wasn't sure if I wanted to minor in Literature, Psychology, Visual Arts or Philosophy. After taking your class this semester I've decided to minor in Philosophy and couldn't be more excited to keep on taking philosophy classes at Duke. Next semester I'm taking a class called Philosophy and Literature with Professor Alessandro Gatti, the syllabus looks amazing and although its a very different type of philosophy from the one we worked with in your class I can't wait. Finally, I feel like I should admit that your class made me experience something I'd never felt before. About three times this semester I felt like I had reached my maximum cognitive capacity, I sat down, and simply told myself (or whoever was around me), "I simply do not have the brainpower for this". Trust me, I've been mind-blown in a few classes, I've had epiphanies reading articles and dissertations, and I've gotten gotten stuck in mental reveries after certain conversations, but I've never felt that I simply cannot "think that far". Your class pushed me to this level and honestly made me feel deeply hopeless and inadequate for some periods of time. But this isn't negative in any way (because I eventually figured it out, whatever it was that stunted me at the moment), this type of experience is what assures me that I'm not settling and that I am pushing myself, finding my limits and surpassing them, and really just trying to become a better thinker. I chase the moments where I can push my mental boundaries further and further. So thank you for all you have done for me, my future and my thoughts.

-I feel like filling in bubbles does not justify how good this class was and the difference I think it has made in my career path! Thank you so much for being such an amazing and passionate teacher!

-This class was beyond interesting for me, and the ability of comfortably discussing topics on time and space have broadened my understanding of the world, and allowed me to expand from within me to a state in which I feel closer to the full understanding I have always aimed in learning. Thank you so much for teaching this class, I am aware that I have not been the most attentive student, but I have learned a lot, and I don't think I could have learned such beautiful concepts without this class. I deeply appreciate it.

-I had never taken a philosophy class before, and I was worrying as to whether I could understand a 400-level philosophy course. This class constantly bent my mind and thought patterns into thinking abstract topics that we all take as given (i.e. perception of space and time). Initially, I had a hard time writing/explaining my thoughts clearly.

But, as the semester progressed, I started seeing the beauty (the tip of the iceberg) of philosophical thinking and felt like I understood the notion of space & time much better than I could have with a scientific point of view. The topics and assignments thought me a lot (about existence and life), and also broadened my perspective, and I cannot explain how grateful I am to have taken this class from you.

-Dr. Smithson is a great professor. Not only is he extremely knowledgeable about the subjects we covered, but he also had a great sense for what the class did and did not understand. I have never seen a professor so engaged in the questions of the students. He truly did treat everyone in the class as an equal and would fully listen to each question and come up with a thoughtful response. Moreover, he promoted a great classroom culture where each student felt comfortable asking questions.

-Dr. Smithson was a wonderful instructor and genuinely made every class entertaining. Almost every class I found myself laughing at least once, because he is so good at improvising stories/comedy whenever he senses a lull in attention. Couldn't really ask for more out of a professor teaching this.

-I think there could be more concrete outlines provided to students that allow for a better handle of the material. The material can get quite abstract relatively quickly, and it easy to lose sight of the general themes in the swamp of the small details. Dr. Smithson is incredibly well prepared and enthusiastic about the course.

-I wish I could take more classes from Professor Smithson at Duke. He was extremely engaging, thoughtful, and knowledgeable about this difficult subject matter. I was never able to meet with him during scheduled office hours due to conflicts with another class, but he was always willing to meet with me at other times. He was excellent at responding to emails, giving detailed feedback, and generally being accommodating. He had excellent handouts detailing the main ideas of all of the different units of the class that elucidated the difficult readings. I am sincerely envious of students who will take other classes with Professor Smithson in the future – he was absolutely fantastic.

-One of the best instructors I've had at Duke, hands down. He was constantly engaged and enthusiastic, and though the topics we covered we're heavy (particularly at the end of the semester), he did an awesome job of keeping class discussing entertaining and and humorous. His grading was fairly difficult on the papers, but I can tell he is incredibly invested in the learning of his students, and is more than willing to meet with each and every student outside of class to make sure they understand the material. The only thing I would say I wish had been done differently was that the course seemed pretty backloaded—we had a lot of assignments and papers and difficult material at the end of the course, when most students are already feeling burned out.

-Probably the best teacher I've had at Duke.

-Professor Smithson did a really great job at creating a class environment that was stimulating and open to discussion. He explained difficult concepts well and was good about fairly discussing all points of view. He was somewhat disorganized at times. Overall I really enjoyed the class with him though.

-Professor Smithson was easily the most enthusiastic and engaging professor that I have had at Duke. You can tell that he is genuinely interested in the subject matter, and he takes his time to make sure everyone understands new concepts. I can definitely say that I have never been bored in his class. He has a wide breadth of knowledge on the subject matter, and is more than willing to help students outside of class time. I would

recommend Professor Smithson to anyone even remotely interested in the class's subject matter.

-Robert Smithson uses humor to engage students. He is also very receptive to questions and tries his best to foster conversation among the students. The class dynamic was amazing and Professor [Smithson] made this one of my best classes taken at Duke.

-This professor is the bomb. Very funny and engaging. One of my favorite professors so far.

## **2. PHIL 220: Early Modern Philosophy (Spring 2016)**

-I highly enjoyed this course and because of how much I enjoyed it, I declared a minor in philosophy. It greatly challenged me and enticed me to be challenged further. Professor Smithson is one of my favorite professors that I've had. He took challenging material and made it interesting and clear to understand.

-Robert (he prefers that we use his first name) is a wonderful instructor. He is going to make a fantastic professor for whatever institution is fortunate enough to gain his services. He is SO excited about philosophy, and he goes above and beyond in terms of making time for students with questions, concerns, etc. He is always available through email and is also available multiple times per week to discuss coursework, or even anything related to philosophy. He is professional and respectful. This is my favorite course of all I've taken at UNC, because he isn't overly concerned with clobbering us with excessive busy work, but instead his assignments are poignant and meaningful throughout the course. He is fair, and he welcomes feedback. I've learned more in this course than in others because he finds a way to make sometimes "dry" material very fun and engaging, and by the end of class or just sitting at home you realize you've considered some deep topics in ways you might never have before. Now I look at everything differently in my world, and this is thanks to Robert. Another thing about Robert: he is VERY funny, and incorporates comedy into his lectures. I remember multiple times this semester where our entire class was in stitches, and it was always about philosophy. I never would have thought that possible prior to taking this course. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to learn from someone as gifted at what he does as Robert is. I wish I had more time here at UNC so that I could take more courses with Robert. I plan on remaining in contact with him and seeking him out as a mentor/resource when I have questions about my own independent philosophy reading, which I will now be doing because of the inspiration I've gained from Robert. UNC could only benefit from having more instructors like Robert.

-Robert is an excellent instructor and taught the course very well. If I was not a senior, the course was good enough that I would have considered majoring in philosophy. I would recommend both the course and Robert as an instructor to any of my friends asking me about it. Robert was able to break down the topics very nicely and was both clear and interesting. I enjoyed his occasional over the top humor and teaching style which made this class much better to attend in the morning. When ever I would come to office hours he showed enthusiasm for talking about the material and expanding on what we went over in class and putting it in context with other topics we had previously discussed as well as how modern philosophical thought relates to what we covered.

-This course was one of the best courses I have ever had at Carolina. Robert Smithson is a very good teacher. Philosophy isn't an easy subject to understand but he was great at teaching it. He is very easy to understand and does his best to help students when

they need it. He is also really funny and that made the class really enjoyable. I enjoyed his class so much that I decided to enroll in another one of his courses next semester. Hopefully that says enough!

-Challenging subject matter, but professor Smithson makes it engaging and understandable

-Good class. Instructor was enthusiastic, caring, and knowledgeable. I wish that he was able to engage the class more. While interesting, he mostly lectured the whole time. Some days there was more class discussion, but most days no one spoke much.

-Great course!

-He really loves what he's talking about which transfers to his students. He's infectious.

-Mr. Smithson is a very enthusiastic instructor, who shows that he cares for the topic at hand. He teaches his students with respect and helps those who need help with the best of his ability.

-Really enjoyed the lectures in this course. Professor Smithson was a great teacher that encouraged students to engage with class, made class fun and exciting.

-Really exciting class. Instructor made it fun and the material exciting to learn. Definitely will recommend.

-Robert may still be in grad school but he is one of my favorite instructors I have had at UNC. He is unbelievably engaging and enthusiastic. Im more awake in his 9:05 class than in all of my other classes which all start till after 10:00.

-The instructor was great but his grading methods made the subject matter harder to grasp or at least explain

-This class was engaging and fun, and made literature analysis accessible to everyone in the class regardless of their experience with it.

-Very good course with interesting subject material. The instructor was very passionate about the material and helpful in explaining it.

### **3. PHIL 230: Bioethics (Summer 2017)**

-I have never had a professor quite like him before. He brought a level of energy and thoughtfulness that made me appreciate being a part of a university. I was impressed with how he always encouraged students without ever patronizing them; if a student contributed a flawed argument, he would point out the problem without being harsh. I felt that he understood the interests of students well, and I don't think he ever made an unreasonable request or assignment. Plus, I love his humor and attitude.

-He was enthusiastic about teaching the class. He was able to facilitate good discussions and keep the class engaged.

-Probably one of the best teachers I've ever had at UNC, as he was both engaging and informative. We laughed a lot and learned a lot!

-Professor Smithson is very engaging and encourages all students to contribute to discussions. He validates student's opinions and prompts students to think critically. The small class size encourages students to be involved.

-Great guy!

-Group discussions are good.

-Great stuff.

-Instructor was great, and kept the class entertaining with engaging discussion!

- Good class, good teacher, but maybe phil 165 shouldn't be a Maymester course. Too much content to cover.
- Great class, it was a pleasure being in his class.
- I have really enjoyed this class. Tough to fit all of the material and papers into such a short time, but I think Robert has done a great job of this.
- I signed up expecting to enjoy this course, and it thoroughly met my expectations. I think about bioethical issues in my daily life as a result of this course. Some of the concepts I absorbed are truly insightful and significant.
- The material presented was very interesting. A lot of material was covered in each class due to the nature of a maymester course.
- Great class, hate it was so short!