

EVIDENCE OF TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

Allison Aitken

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>I. Teaching Statement.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>II. Teaching Awards.....</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>III. Course Evaluations and Comments.....</u>	<u>5</u>

I. TEACHING STATEMENT

I have taught courses in the history of both European and Asian philosophy and have experience teaching at the undergraduate and graduate level. One of the joys of teaching introductory level philosophy courses is helping students to realize that many of the most fundamental questions concerning human existence remain open questions: How do the mind and body interact? What is the nature of causal power? I had one student in an intro course who repeatedly and insistently asked, “But what’s the *answer*? Haven’t scientists figured this out by now??” Although he was initially frustrated, he soon became one of my most eager students, spending hours discussing the material with me outside of the classroom. While confronting the openness of philosophical questions can be initially unsettling, it ideally sparks intellectual excitement. It is that spark of intellectual excitement that drives my personal passion for philosophy, and it is the motivation of igniting or nurturing that spark in others that sustains my love of teaching philosophy.

Part of the process of engaging with an open question is developing intellectual imagination. This is an important skill not only for philosophy and academic work more generally, but also for social, familial, and civic engagement in contemporary society where we are faced with an abundance of diverse perspectives. I view the study of the history of philosophy in particular as an invaluable opportunity to try on the glasses of another worldview. I offer students space to bypass their knee-jerk reactions, and a chance to dwell on unfamiliar positions without immediately having to search for a damning objection. The first order of business is to intellectually inhabit the perspective of the thinker, to understand the moves of the argument, and to seek insights from them. I encourage students to ask questions like, “What if the world really were like x ? What would follow from that? What kinds of philosophical problems does this view help to resolve? What kinds of explanatory burdens does this view take on and what kinds of presuppositions does it rely on? What presuppositions of mine are incompatible with this view, and are they justified?” It is then when the critical engagement of defending or objecting to a given position is most edifying.

Here’s an example. A group of students in my introductory Early Modern Philosophy class was particularly dismissive of one of Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God, so I told them that it was their job to convince *me* that the argument is valid and sound. I asked them to work together to recruit the best reasons to motivate each of the premises. At every turn, I

pushed back to encourage them to invest themselves even more deeply in defending each premise. By the end of class, I announced, “You’ve just proved the existence of God.” This was met with stunned looks and outcries of disbelief (“What just happened!?”). One of those students later related to me that my pedagogical point that there’s no glory in defeating a straw man deeply resonated with him, and it was a lesson that he took into his coursework in other disciplines.

I think philosophy is best done collaboratively. I emphasize that studying philosophy is a team sport, and as a learning community, we have a common goal of collectively arriving at a deeper understanding of the course material. Thus, in addition to private meetings, I hold open office hours where I invite students to discuss the material more deeply than the classroom allows, to engage in friendly debate with one another, and also to explore how the course material relates to their other intellectual interests. I also see open office hours as an opportunity to empower students to teach one another under my guidance. Just as I have found teaching to be an excellent way to deepen my own understanding, I observe that giving students the opportunity to teach one another helps them to cement and integrate key concepts, while also supporting them in formulating and articulating their own unique perspective on the material. In one instance, a student came in talking a mile a minute, sure that he had discovered the fatal flaw in Hume’s argument for his claim that our belief in the existence of mind-independent material objects is not justified. Another student kept stopping him. She would ask, “What kind of skepticism are you referring to?” “What do you mean by x ?” “What do you mean by y ?” This exchange was mutually beneficial, bringing clarity to key concepts for all the students in the room, and forcing the Hume objector to carefully reconsider his assault.

Since clear and effective communication is one of the most valuable life skills fostered in the study of philosophy, I regard my role in teaching philosophical writing as that of a writing coach. I am invested in the development of each student. I believe that it is pedagogically important to give each student the best chance possible to experience what it’s like to write an A range philosophy paper. After all, it’s one thing to be told what one could have done differently to produce a top-quality paper, and it’s an entirely different thing to know what it feels like to write such a paper. For that reason, I am a strong advocate of the rewrite process. I have found that students are more attentive to feedback with rewrites and are better able to integrate the advice I give them in a way that helps them develop as writers. As one of my students commented in a course evaluation, “Sometimes I felt like I could physically feel my writing improving.” In addition to my regular office hours, I schedule individual meetings with each student between essay drafts to coach them in their writing.

I have also taught Classical Tibetan language at multiple levels. Since most students are drawn to Tibetan language by an interest in Buddhist studies, these courses consist largely of reading Buddhist philosophical texts in their source language. I stress that translation is an act of interpretation. I emphasize attending to grammatical analysis and conceptual content in equal parts, since no matter how well one understands grammatical cases, one cannot translate an argument accurately without a firm grasp of the conceptual vocabulary or philosophical context. For this reason, I often divide my whiteboard into two sections: one for mapping the grammatical structure of sentences and the other for the conceptual mapping of arguments.

In all my classes, I aim to create a safe and inclusive space for students to comfortably experiment with new skills and unfamiliar material. In discussion-based classes, I explicitly introduce norms for discussion that encourage respectful yet critically engaged collaboration, treading a middle way between the two extremes of complacent relativism and exclusionary

dismissivism. I find that these norms are more effective the more agency I give students in helping to establish them. I utilize a range of techniques to promote balanced participation. This may take the form of partner or group activities using gamification to integrate new concepts or argument structures, collecting reflections on a reading in advance of a class meeting and then integrating them into the discussion, using a handout as a map for the class and asking each student in turn to read and comment on a quote, etc.

Classroom dynamics are just that—dynamic. So, I ask students to complete a midterm check-in survey and use the results as a springboard for a reflective discussion as a learning community, inquiring into both how I can improve in facilitating their learning process and also how the students can self-monitor, balancing their own participation with making room for a diversity of voices. I am conscious that different individuals are comfortable contributing in different ways, and I emphasize that there are many productive ways to participate in the classroom, whether that's posing a constructive challenge to a classmate's claim or engaging in active listening. Given that my own research is interdisciplinary and multicultural, my mind naturally approaches the issues of analytic philosophy from a variety of perspectives. Aside from helping with my research, this proclivity also helps me to invite a diversity of perspectives in the classroom, with attention to the varied intellectual, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds of students in the classroom.

Just as I take an interest in who my students are with their varied intellectual interests, I also like to let them know about my own range of research interests. In the Early Modern philosophy courses I teach, students from a diversity of backgrounds invariably reach out to me to discuss their curiosity about Asian philosophy. We explore how Asian philosophers have approached the same fundamental philosophical questions taken up by Early Modern European thinkers, such as the mind-body problem, skepticism about external objects, and the nature of the mind and consciousness. Along the way, I have developed mentor-mentee relationships with several students that have extended beyond the semester, guiding them in their extracurricular study of Asian philosophy by providing recommended reading and meeting to discuss the material. One committed student continues to bring me her argument reconstructions of the Buddhist philosophy texts I recommend.

Finally, I insist that my students consider how abstract philosophical questions impact their lives in concrete ways. As an example, I'd like to share one more anecdote. When teaching Hume vs. Reid on freedom, after presenting both sides of the debate, I passed around cookies, inviting students to introspect for a few moments while making the decision to take or not to take a cookie to see if they could observe themselves as agents freely determining their own will, independent of causal conditions. Afterwards, one student reported back that he spontaneously boarded a bus to New York to prove to himself that he had free will, only to conclude in the end that he was always going to have done that.

II. TEACHING AWARDS

Certificates of Distinction in Teaching,* sponsored by the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning in cooperation with the Office of Undergraduate Education, Harvard University:

- **Early Modern Philosophy: Self and World** (2018)
- **Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy** (2016)
- **Intermediate Classical Tibetan** (2015)

*A *Certificate of Distinction in Teaching* is earned when the Overall Instructor Evaluation is a mean score of 4.5 or higher (out of a 5.0 scale), based on a minimum of 5 student evaluations. I earned a *Certificate of Distinction in Teaching* in every course I have taught at Harvard that yielded the minimum number of evaluations.

III. COURSE EVALUATIONS AND COMMENTS

i. Teaching Evaluation Summaries from Harvard Q-Score Results

	Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy (Spring 2016)	Early Modern Philosophy: Self and World (Spring 2018)
Overall Instructor Evaluation	4.7	4.7
Effective Lectures or Presentations	4.4	4.7
Facilitates Discussions & Encourages Participation	4.4	4.8
Accessible Outside Class	4.7	5.0
Generates Enthusiasm for the Subject Matter	4.4	4.8
Gives Useful Feedback on Assignments	4.7	5.0
Returns Assignments in a Timely Fashion	4.8	4.9
Class Size	26 (two sections)	14 (one section)*

*Mean scores based on a 5-point scale
1=unsatisfactory; 2=fair; 3=good; 4=very good; 5=excellent*

*In addition to teaching one section for Early Modern Philosophy: Self and World, Spring 2018, I also served as Head Teaching Fellow, which involved managing the logistics for a large class and coordinating the work of the other teaching assistants.

Note: Evaluations are unavailable for Buddhist Philosophy Proseminar (Fall 2015) due to a late administrative appointment.

	Intermediate Classical Tibetan (Fall 2015)	Intermediate Classical Tibetan (Spring 2016)	Intermediate Classical Tibetan (Fall 2016)	Elementary Classical Tibetan (Fall 2016)	Elementary Classical Tibetan (Spring 2017)
Overall Instructor Evaluation	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.3	4.7
Effective Lectures or Presentations	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.3	4.3
Facilitates Discussions & Encourages Participation	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.5	4.3
Accessible Outside Class	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.7
Generates Enthusiasm for the Subject Matter	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.3	4.3
Gives Useful Feedback on Assignments	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.7	4.3
Returns Assignments in a Timely Fashion	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.3
Class Size	8	6	3	4	4

*Mean scores based on a 5-point scale
1=unsatisfactory; 2=fair; 3=good; 4=very good; 5=excellent*

ii. Quotations from Student Evaluations

Complete comments available upon request. TF abbreviates Teaching Fellow.

Early Modern Philosophy: Self and World

“Allie is the best TF I have so far during my time at Harvard. She is extremely well-organized and dedicates an extraordinary amount of time to teaching Phil 8. Allie was always accessible outside of class, well beyond her weekly office hours. She also gave individualized, detailed feedback for every essay that made it much easier to improve my thinking and writing. Very grateful to have had Allie as a TF!”

“Honestly, I looked forward to section more than any other class I had all semester. Allie is the greatest TF I've ever had! Honestly amazing. She made the class really transformative.”

“Allie did a fantastic job with our section. She's very knowledgeable about the material and teaches it in an easy-to-understand way. She's open to new ideas from students. She also gives amazing feedback on essays and makes it a point to be available to help as much as possible, which is great. I loved her section!”

“Thank you for how invested you were in my learning process. I feel like phil 8 has been the reason why my writing improved so much 2nd semester, and was in large part because of your copious comments on my essays. I also appreciated that you always took the time to answer questions about the course material and whatever tangents that led to.”

“Allie is the best TF I've ever had. Her comments were incredibly helpful to me, and section was a lot of fun.”

“Allie is just amazing, for real! She invested so much time in writing thoughtful comments to my writing assignments and replies to my emails. Amazing, amazing, amazing!”

“One of the best TFs if not the best TF I have had at Harvard.”

“One of the challenges of my section seemed to be incorporating a wide variety of personalities, academic and otherwise. Allie admirably tried to balance discussion and debate, especially in light of midterm comments, all without compromising the material. She was also wonderfully helpful on writing assignments, dedicating incredible time and energy to marginal comments and (extra) office hours to suit our needs.”

“Love Allie. Kind, accessible, whip-smart, and gives great feedback. Everything a TF should be. Nothing but great things to say about section with her.”

“Your feedback has made me a better writer than 4 years of high school ever could. You taught me to examine every part of my writing and thinking. Thank you so much. This has been the best section I've had during my time at Harvard.”

“Allie, you are just amazing! Please, keep up your enthusiasm, your love for detail, your thorough emails, your positive attitude. You made PHIL8 an incredible experience... Thank you!!!”

“Allie -- you are an incredible TF and an educator. You have taught me the beauty of philosophy.”

Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy

“Allison was a wonderful TF—she is very clear, organized, and effective at reviewing course material. Her feedback on essays was the most detailed and helpful I have ever received in a class. Further, she was approachable and available during office hours and eager to help you with your writing or understanding of the material.”

“Allie was a fantastic section leader. Going into the class, I had read the Q scores from past years, which said ‘This class was great, except section was not always so fun/useful,’ so I was expecting that when I walked into section and found myself pleasantly surprised. Allie really genuinely cares about her students and made a great effort to get all our questions answered inside and outside section. She was always happy to explain everything twice during office hours. I appreciated all her comments on the essays as well.”

“Allie was so great! She was always available if I needed help and was so good at explaining complicated philosophical concepts. She was so helpful and really a great section leader.”

“Allie does a great job at leading discussion and also gives very detailed feedback on assignments. She's quick at responding to emails and has regular and flexible office hours to meet with students about writing or passages. She's clearly very dedicated and passionate, and that really made me enjoy the subject a lot.”

“Really good section leader. Very in command of the material. Always willing to talk things through to you get it.”

“Allie was great as a TF. Her feedback on the essays in particular was thorough and very useful! Her office hours before the essays/exam were also very useful! She is patient with lots of questions and is always enthusiastic about it.”

“Allie explains concepts in the clearest way possible and directs discussions very effectively. It's also very refreshing and stimulating to discuss course material with her outside of class.”

Intermediate Classical Tibetan

“She is probably the best language teacher I have ever had, at Harvard and elsewhere. Her enthusiasm and positive attitude, coupled with her kindness and deep understanding of each student's needs, made class and office hours a pleasure to attend. She went above and beyond to make sure that we all felt comfortable participating, asking questions, and getting extra help as needed. She is a very talented teacher and understands how to get her students excited about the language, culture, and philosophy about which she is so knowledgeable.”

“Allie is a very gifted teacher and superb at assessing and meeting where the students are and pushing them where needed.”

“Allison is a wonderful and gifted teacher. She restored my appreciation of the language. I wish that I could have had her for the 2 previous courses.”

“Allie is a great teacher, with many good qualities such as kind, responsible, and understanding. I think that she is the best PhD student I know to teach this course.”

“She is one of the best teachers I have ever had and has reignited my interest and confidence in the subject matter.”

Elementary Classical Tibetan

“Allie is a dedicated and kind teacher. She spent time and effort making sure that everyone understood the material well. She never made anyone feel uncomfortable about asking questions.”

“Allie did a perfect job teaching this course.”

“I don't know if I could have learned from a better Tibetan teacher at this level.”