

# Teaching Statement

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One text I have taught in introductory humanities courses is Plato's *Laches*. In this dialogue, Socrates and his interlocutors attempt to develop a rigorous definition of courage, one which correctly applies to all and only courageous acts. So I begin by asking students to offer their own definitions of courage, first discussing the matter in pairs for 1-2 minutes, then sharing as a whole class. I then prompt them to challenge these definitions by raising counterexamples. For example, students are often inclined to define courage as "overcoming fear," but people who did something heroic sometimes say afterwards that they felt no fear, because they were so focused on doing what needed to be done. Are such people not truly courageous? Or have they in some way "overcome" fear despite not feeling any? Having students first attempt to define courage on their own only to realize that the task is trickier than it seems increases their interest in the text. If possible, I hold this discussion *before* students have read *Laches*—at the end of the previous class session, for example.

Once we turn to the text itself, I first ask students to help me outline each main argument. I want students to understand the dialogue, but the more important goal here is to teach them strategies for reading difficult texts. (*Laches* is sometimes quite opaque.) When we reach a difficult point in the text, I ask students to brainstorm hypotheses about what the puzzling passage might mean. We then evaluate the likelihood of these hypotheses based on the specific wording of the passage and on the broader context. Initially, most students' reaction to a puzzling passage is to skip over it, or to go with their *first* guess about what it means. My aim is to provide them with more effective alternatives.

Once we have an outline of the argument, I use that argument as a launching pad for student debate. For example, Nicias proposes an intriguing definition of courage, which Socrates criticizes by showing that it leads to a contradiction. Is Socrates's argument against Nicias's definition sound? Is there any way we could save Nicias's definition from Socrates's objection by modifying it slightly? If his definition is unworkable, what is Nicias nonetheless right about? Students are generally able to develop theories about courage which build off of the insights of the text but also improve on them.

A main goal of these discussions is for students to challenge each proposed position and to see each position from multiple perspectives. Most first-year students feel satisfied if they can assert a position and offer one or two reasons for holding it. They are not usually good at judging whether their reasons will sound convincing to someone who doesn't already agree with them. Learning to see things from an opponent's perspective, and to adjust one's argument to take that perspective into account, is one of the most difficult and valuable skills that a liberal arts education develops. Where students are less adept at generating objections to one another's arguments, I will assign specific exercises to get them to practice these tasks (e.g., having them brainstorm possible objections to a specific argument in pairs, or assigning them opposing

positions to debate). If the students debate well with little prompting, I may merely moderate while recording the key points they make.

I sometimes use a Word document displayed on a projector to keep a running record of the major positions students have proposed, along with arguments for and objections to those positions. Keeping an outline helps students not to lose the thread of a complicated discussion. It also quietly highlights the most valuable points made in the discussion without disrupting the conversation. I email this outline to students after class, as a supplement to their own notes and a source of ideas for a future paper. A variant of this tactic I've sometimes used with students writing their very first philosophical paper is to record anything a student says which would work well as a thesis. I then allow the students to use one of those thesis statements in their first paper, if they choose. Seeing 10-20 examples teaches the students what a good thesis statement looks like and decreases anxiety about what may be their first college-level paper. It also makes students see vividly what good resources their colleagues are, since this helpful document was generated entirely by themselves and their peers.