Teaching Statement

Honesty requires me to admit that I have no previous experience in teaching philosophy. However I do have five years of experience in teaching exercise classes for undergraduate computer science students. Those classes were relatively informal, the main purpose being to help a group of approximately twenty students solve a designated set of programming exercises, that accompanied the weekly lectures given by the professor. Although this experience may not be very similar to that of teaching a philosophy class, it has offered me the insight that I thoroughly enjoy explaining complicated material to students.

Given that I would be approaching the challenge to teaching philosophy as a novice, my principal methodological tool would be to listen and learn from those who do have invaluable experience. So I will go ahead and offer a few personal suggestions on what I take to be vital ingredients for being a successful lecturer in philosophy, but all of these can be overruled or modified by the advice that I might receive from my future colleagues.

The most important lesson that I have learned during my transition from a student into a researcher, is that quality counts more than quantity: it is better to have an excellent understanding of one point of view, than to have a superficial understanding of several points of view. All too often I have seen professors try to squeeze in too much material into a single course, diluting the content into a confusing patchwork of roughly drawn sketches. Their zeal for including every philosopher or school of thought that is relevant to the subject of interest is certainly admirable, but I fear that they sometimes lose out of sight how overwhelming it can be for a student who is encountering all these ideas for the first time. Some philosophy professors seem to forget that they themselves acquired most of their philosophical knowledge by studying the material on their own, whereas the actual lectures served mainly to arouse their curiosity and offer a paradigmatic case-study. In this respect I find the following old proverb rather appropriate: "give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime".

The second component that I would aim to integrate into my teaching, is a Socratic form of intellectual modesty. Good philosophers change their minds every now and then, and even in case their views on a certain topic do remain fairly constant, they acknowledge and understand the validity of different points of view. If a professor presents her views - justified as they may be - as the definitive answer to a question, then she runs into the risk that her students will fail to engage with the material in a creative and thought-provoking manner. Question marks are generally better devices for stimulating thought than exclamation marks. (Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations offer an excellent case in point.)

The final component I will consider is entirely in line with the previous ones: a philosophy classroom ought to be filled with several voices, not just a single one.

Of course the idea is not to outsource one's teaching responsibilities to the brightest and most vocal students, it goes without saying that the majority of the time should consist of the lecturer doing the talking. But activating the students by stimulating them to ask questions is a key component to activating their interest and attention for the subject under discussion. Even the greatest of monologues can be lost on an audience if it is limited to taking on the role of a passive and voiceless recipient of information, rather than that of a critical participant in a discussion.

I realise that these ideas are probably not very novel, and they can hardly be seen as the description of a unique style of teaching. Yet I hope to have convinced you that my current understanding of an education in philosophy forms a sufficient basis to start building on, allowing me to perfect the practice as I would go along.