

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

If one can find the new by warming up the old, he can become a teacher. – Confucius

Learning in the humanities is a life-long process of enriching oneself by finding new meanings from the old material. What I refer to by “the old material” encompasses not only the age-old written or orally transmitted texts but also such things as social customs and values to which we are so accustomed that we normally raise little doubts about them. In this sense, we could acquire valuable insights applicable to our everyday life by interpreting an old scripture from a new perspective, but we also could enhance or radically change our understanding of both ourselves and the world by critically examining our fundamental assumptions and exploring alternative trajectories of our ideas and worldviews.

However, since our possibly biased perspectives and inexperience often mislead us, the balanced nourishment of our selves is best realized in an intellectual community where extensive knowledge is transmitted in an effective and organized manner and positive criticisms are welcomed. Such a place in our age would be universities and colleges, and I believe the process of learning and teaching *culminates* in the classroom where individuals meet each other and mutually grow by sometimes corroborating and sometimes challenging each other’s thoughts and viewpoints.

My ideal classroom is primarily a safe and comfortable place where students of diverse background and experience are encouraged to clarify their thoughts and expose their assumptions implied in their interpretations of the course material for mutual examination. I facilitate this process of self-identification and revelation of oneself to others in several ways.

First, on the first day of each class I formally ask my students the names they want to go by in the class and how to correctly pronounce them. I practice matching up their names and faces for the following several weeks, and address them as they prefer for the rest of the semester. For the preferred name is a crucial part of one’s self-identity to be respected, and by expressing my respect for their individuality, I also expect them to think and behave as fully responsible individuals in the class. For example, in the past I had a traditionally underrepresented African-American student who insisted to be addressed Mr. Frank (not a genuine name). By asking for this additional and “unfair” respect, I think he wanted us to keep alert to the issue of diversity and where he is coming from historically and where he is headed for socially.

Second, I like to have a brief small group discussion session (4-5 people) in order to promote the following class-wide discussion and to let my students have a chance to better know each other. As I have observed, small group discussion has an “ice-breaking” effect that makes the students feel more comfortable to present their ideas to their peers because they are addressing a smaller audience; it also gives them more confidence when expressing their ideas to the whole class later, because they will now have a better sense of what other people might think about the topic in question. In addition, I saw many students of mine develop their in-class discussion group into outside-classroom study group and

achieve better academic results for the course.

However, despite the paramount importance of the classroom as a place where individuals actually meet and intensively discuss various topics, the learning and teaching aiming at producing independent critical thinkers should start at least a week before each class session and have strong potential to let the students want to contemplate what they learned during the class searching for new meanings for their everyday lives even long after they left the classroom. To realize this goal, I set up a course website where my students are required to submit various types of writing assignments: one-word journal, free response paper, and afterthought paper.

First, One-word journal is to provide a single word summary of a particular reading material and write a page-long justification for the one-word summary of one's choice. I believe that a truly critical and creative thinking must be firmly based on the thorough understanding of the course material, and this type of writing assignments is meant to help the students do their readings more attentively and deeply. I provide oral feedback in each class, and let my students discuss their choices hoping them to collectively develop standards to assess their journals and use those standards for their next reading.

Second, I let my students write free response papers to the readings in order to give them safe opportunities to build up their abilities of critical thinking and clear writing gradually throughout the course. At the same time, their weekly response papers are wonderful source of insights that enables me to better prepare my lecture and discussion by letting me know in advance what problems my students are most interested in and what are the range of their responses to those issues. I give on-line written feedback for these papers.

Thirdly, the outside-classroom activities my students engage in after each class session include writing page-long afterthought papers and volunteered on-line discussion. Afterthought papers are designed to help them refine their thoughts and try to provide alternative arguments and perspectives to what were previously provided during the classroom discussions, and on-line discussions are meant to give the students extra opportunities to prolong their collective contemplation of things beyond the classroom door.

The courses I might offer will range from an introductory level survey of Asian religions or Chinese philosophy in general to advanced seminars on ancient Chinese theories of emotion and East Asian neo-Confucianism. On whichever level I teach, I intend that my courses are enriching to my students of diverse background in various ways that will suit their particular academic and personal needs. Specifically, through the in and outside classroom activities discussed above, I hope that those students of general North American cultural background broaden their intellectual and spiritual horizon by critically reflecting upon their own cultural assumptions and beliefs, and the students of Asian ancestry in general who are curious about their own philosophical and religious traditions could enrich themselves by learning more about their roots.

However, I do not honor in my class any sectarian efforts at searching for the orthodox doctrinal view and justifying it against other traditions or other competing positions in a single tradition. For I firmly believe that learning is hardly a process of rigidifying one's position but a life-long process of widening one's outlook and enriching one's intellectual and spiritual resources by "warming up the old" continuously.