William English
Teaching Statement

Although I have wide ranging teaching interests, during graduate school at Duke and as a post-doc at Brown I was primarily responsible for teaching political theory to undergraduates. This was a rewarding task both because of the importance of the material itself and because my students generally approach the subject with eagerness and concern. When Aristotle described politics as the "master science" he was alluding to the reality that politics encompasses and enables the flourishing of a large variety of human goods and practices. Introducing students to political philosophy thus entails introducing them to a range of fundamental human questions and contemporary dilemmas, which will remain relevant to my students' ongoing lives.

However, like all academic disciplines, political philosophy is liable to suffer from both abstraction and tunnel vision. I aim to avoid these pitfalls by charting a middle course of investigation that keeps big questions in view while attending to the complexities of the problems and arguments immediately before us. Towards this end I carefully choose our reading selections, require each student to introduce a set of readings to the class, and devote particular attention the composition of final papers. Ultimately I hope to accomplish two things: first, to introduce students to important concepts and arguments within political philosophy and, second, to enable them to read, understand, and critically evaluate philosophically sophisticated political texts that they may encounter beyond my seminars.

For a variety of reasons, political philosophy proceeds pedagogically by reading and discussing seminal texts. This is, in part, because those who write about politics are themselves almost always responding to texts and traditions that precede them. Thus the study of political thought is inextricably linked to the study of the history of political thought. But herein lies one of the most interesting features of political philosophy, which it shares with many of the humanities: although its texts are situated in reference to particular historical problems, in the ideas put forward by various authors within their various contingent perspective we continue to find sparks of perception, insight, and understanding relevant to our lives today. Is this because political problems are perennial, rooted in our nature or some transcendent reality, or simply because our unique history and ways of life have happened to preserve some patterns of concern? This, too, turns out to be another fundamental question of political philosophy. Indeed, one pedagogical challenge is to communicate those features of historical context that are relevant to a text's conceptual reconstruction, while not losing sight of what it still has to say to us. For this purpose, I frequently direct students to online resources that provide accessible overviews of historical periods.

Ultimately, however, with historical understanding in the background, I ask my students three basic questions about a text, namely: What exactly does the text say and mean? Is it right? Does it matter? These questions form the basis of our seminar explorations. Works in political

philosophy naturally invite questions about their relevance to our problems and purposes today, and I frequently ask students to reflect in a personal way on the bigger picture (I sometimes circulate an ironic disclaimer – "10 reasons not to take this political philosophy course" – posted on my website). All of this sets what I consider to be an ideal stage for the "conversation" of a successful seminar.

By describing a successful seminar as a big conversation, what do I have in mind? I am sympathetic to a "liberal arts" tradition in the humanities that considering teaching to be a rather broad activity, perhaps extending to all aspects of everyday communication. How, however, are we to understand the particular task and privilege of those who are teachers by profession?

I think that successful teaching does generally maintain the overall character of a conversation. This is not to deny the place for formal lectures or to insist on an equal contribution from all parties. However, even lectures must be critical engaged in order to be well appropriated, and generally students who listen most attentively have the greatest capacity to move a conversation forward. I like to lead off with a lecture that serves both as a conceptual overview and a provocative "hook" into particular questions and controversies, which my students and I can then explore through conversation.

I take it to be a truism, but nonetheless true, that people learn by doing. Thus, a successful teacher must provide exercises, activities, or forums for student to apply their knowledge. Also, evaluative feedback and clear standards of achievement are important for enabling students to better judge and refine their performance. A rigorous, precise, and vibrant classroom conversation is the primary arena for this exchange. Homework assignments and in-class presentations can deepen and augment it. And the final paper serves as a sort of capstone to a semester's long conversation, enabling the student to have a final constructive word informed by a semester of insight and reflection from the whole classroom.

Conversation, reading, and writing all go hand in hand. However, it is the unique purpose of the classroom to provide a context for productive conversation. Indeed, the value of the spoken word is so great that I encourage (and sometimes assign) students to listen to recordings of classic orations when the content permits.

The final essential ingredient in good teaching is the material itself. If the subject does not naturally incite curiosity and command interest, then my job is somewhat doomed from the outset. Part of the task of teaching then is to communicate the reason for my interest in this material in the first place and, hopefully, its relevance and meaning at large. This is related to a final responsibility that I believe the teacher has, namely a transparent commitment to the truth. Genuine conversation is distinguished from simply rhetoric in that the former is not content to persuade through manipulation, half truths, or obfuscations. The classroom should be a unique arena that does not bow to everyday pressures of intellectual sloppiness. In the honesty of their feedback, the tenaciousness of their arguments, and a commitment to clear thought teachers can

provide students with an environment uniquely suited for learning- one which they may not encounter in other walks of life.

A final note about "technology" in the classroom: I do find technological innovations especially useful for two purposes, both of which serve as aides to conversation. First, many technologies enable me to deliver material to my students in remarkably efficient ways. All my courses are registered on Blackboard, and I use this software extensively for posting e-reserves. This enables my students to access readings easily and to know exactly which excerpts from longer texts we will cover. Blackboard is also an excellent medium of communication for transmitting new articles, lecture outlines, and class updates. Secondly, I find that in certain circumstances, particular technologies can prove incredibly useful for visualizing or experiencing important but complex points. For example I have incorporated Duke's "personal response device" system into my lectures on voting theorems and social choice criticisms of democracy. As technologies evolve I place a high priority on keeping abreast of their development and possible utility. At the end of the day I am in principle open to any technology that can improve or make more efficient the conversation of learning, while keeping in mind that technology can never be a substitute for the conversation itself.

My teaching portfolio includes the following courses:

"Freedom," Brown POLS0820D-S01 (Fall 2010)
- A first year seminar I designed and taught.

"Prosperity and Poverty: The History, Ethics, and Economics of the Wealth of Nations," Brown POLS 1150 (Spring 2011)
- A lecture course, co-designed and co-taught with historian Colin Wilder.

"The History of Conservative Thought," Duke PoliSci 199CS.02 (Fall 2007)
- An undergraduate seminar which I designed and taught.

"Ethics and Policy Making," Duke PubPol 316 (Fall 2008)
- A masters level course taught by Evan Charney in Duke's Public Policy School, for which I TAed (grading and occasionally lecturing).

"Liberty, Equality, and the American Constitution," Duke PoliSci 178.01 CS (Spring 2008)
- Taught by Erwin Chemerinsky from Duke's Law School, I was the head TA for this course, which had 250 students, extensive office hours, and long essay exams.

"Introduction to Political Theory," Duke PoliSci 123 D (Fall 2006)
- I was a TA for this writing intensive course taught by Tom Spragens, for which I graded papers and ran two weekly discussion sections.