

# Teaching Statement

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The teacher's first and foremost job is to convey the important information concerning the course's subject. But if this were a teacher's only role, we could record one really great teacher once and play that class back in successive semesters, and, combined with a thorough textbook, this would suffice for "learning."

Instead, I believe that a teacher's job consists of much more strenuous work. To begin, the teacher has to motivate the student to want to learn the subject; very few students are naturally gung-ho about every course the department requires them to take, although almost all students are enthused about their major in general. By showing how each class period and each course is relevant and interesting irrespective of their personal proclivities, I believe that we can get the students to excel.

I have started out every class I have lectured in, either through my labbing assignments or when I've had the opportunity to substitute teach, with the simple question, "why are we learning what we're learning today?" I approach teaching from a highly Socratic viewpoint: I try to call on everyone in the class, learn their names, and force them to guess at answers. Being an introvert myself, I empathize with the students having a teacher like me, so I mix in generous amounts of gentle humor and positive reinforcement. I maintain a high energy level because it keeps the class from getting dull, but also because I've found enthusiasm for learning to be gratifyingly infectious.

Of course, the students need never know that the secondary purpose of such methodology is to gauge how well the information is getting across – if I need to speed up or slow down. A tertiary purpose came clear only after I began teaching like this in earnest: many students, especially the younger ones, are much more likely to take advantage of the one-on-one opportunity of office hours or at least stop you after class if they know that you are approachable. My rule is that I'm always available regardless of my technical office hours so that the students know that they are the most important thing on my schedule.

At the undergraduate level, Socratic teaching has the additional benefit of pinpointing the students who have especially bright minds. I've long made it a practice to encourage the students who have caught my attention to think about continuing their education in graduate school – it is surprising how many have simply never given it a thought or understood the many opportunities at their disposal.

Of course, asking questions of graduate students is precisely the kind of training that they need, partly in preparation for their various examinations, and partly as a way to ensure that they do not become intellectually lazy. In a recent graduate-level class, I posed the question (concerning a paper that had been assigned the previous class), "if you were the referee, would you have recommended this paper for publication?" The change in the students' perception of the assignment caused them all to reconsider how they read the paper and what they got out of it, leading to a better reading on the next assignment. I submit that this is what a teacher's job is all about.