

Alison Duncan Kerr

Teaching Statement

I have always been driven to question and challenge assumptions. However, when I was young, none of my teachers appreciated this aspect of my personality and actively discouraged it. I was lucky to have a family that encouraged my critical thinking. This part of my past has influenced the way that I teach in two ways. First, I focus on clarity and argumentation in my classes. Second, I challenge my students and encourage them to challenge each other and me. There are several ways in which these values shape my behavior in the classroom.

A more inclusive atmosphere in the classroom is more likely to encourage students to ask questions, of themselves, of each other, and of me. This sort of interaction is conducive to an active classroom and a great learning experience for the students. Moreover, I find it difficult to recreate common mistakes in the classroom, but students learn well from seeing them. So, I encourage students to take chances, try out hypotheses, and make mistakes. Because I make a point of thanking them for trying when they do make mistakes, the students are comfortable and inspired to work hard. While my classes usually have a laid-back atmosphere, I demand respect from my students for everyone in the classroom. Some of the courses I teach have sensitive topics, and others are also particularly rigorous and challenging. While I want students to feel comfortable asking questions and trying out ideas, this works best when students can discuss calmly and respectfully.

I require students to argue for positions that conflict with their own opinions and to argue for them carefully. I remind them that I am evaluating their arguments but will never assume that they are arguing for what they believe. And, I mention that they should not think that I am arguing for things I actually believe. I think that it is essential for identifying, understanding, and evaluating arguments to be able to see both sides clearly. In several of my courses, we discuss the fact that people are surrounded by arguments from friends (e.g., which movie to watch), advertisements, politicians, etc. We discuss how the skills of being able to identify and to evaluate arguments are applicable in everyday life and provide students with considerable power over their environments.

I enjoy the fact that the dynamic of each class can differ significantly, and I adjust my course accordingly. I have several strategies for developing the sort of classroom environment that I find to be most conducive for learning. When I get a particularly quiet group of students, I assign quick small-group discussion projects. When the students finish discussing something in a small group, they tend to return to the class with a new, more confident voice. And, when I get a group of students who like to talk without necessarily first thinking through their ideas carefully, I often assign brief in-class writing assignments. My feedback is frequent and constructive: I not only provide evaluations on students' work, but also emphasize the steps they should take to improve on future assignments. Even straight A students receive a barrage of questions and comments on their work.

Having taught philosophy for over a decade and having taught several courses multiple times, I have also had the time and feedback required to develop and polish course content. For example, I have taught informal logic many times and not been especially satisfied with any specific textbook. In the past, my handouts were used as a supplement to a textbook. My handouts are now so extensive that I no longer require the purchase of a textbook and instead recommend the textbook only if students want further information. I have also found that certain content and discussions were missing in the philosophical perspectives of gender course that I teach, so I have developed several new topics for the course and regularly invite some professors for a guest lecture. Finally, I noticed that our university did not have a course on the philosophy of sex and love but was confident that a course on this topic would be both popular and valuable. It was a great opportunity to develop a curriculum from the start and introduce it to the university for approval. I enjoyed teaching this new course for the first time this past spring and I am looking forward to teaching it again in Spring 2015.

I adore teaching. I am passionate about helping students to learn new skills and to gain new perspectives. I expect a lot from my students whether the course is an introductory course or an advanced course full of majors. I rely heavily on handouts, though in some of my courses more than others. Student feedback has been nearly universally supportive of my use of handouts, and students focus well while taking notes on the handouts and are more successful on exams. I am always challenging myself to try out new strategies for creating a good learning environment. I have had a number of students return to take two or three further courses with me. And, I have also had a number of students decide to have a minor or a major in philosophy after taking a course with me.