**Diversity Statement**

Jonathan Dixon

Wake Forest University

In October 2023, I participated in the University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s [Prison Education Program](https://www.uncg.edu/event/cas-diversity-award-presentation-jeffrey-kaplan-and-the-uncg-prison-education-program/) at [Butner Federal Prison](https://www.bop.gov/locations/institutions/btf/), NC. On this occasion I went into the medium security federal prison and gave a philosophy lecture and led a discussion with some inmates on the topic “What (and Where) is Music?” This was a very rewarding experience and I hope to do more of this kind of community outreach. This example demonstrates my belief that everyone, regardless of their background, skills, or identity, deserves access to a high-quality education. My hope is that all my students, whoever they are, feel empowered to learn, prosper, and realize their full potential. In short, I am deeply committed to diversity and inclusion.

Promoting these virtues is no easy task since it is well known that, overall, academic philosophy has difficulties fostering diversity and inclusion. For example, as compared to other disciplines in the Humanities, philosophy ranks the lowest in the percentage of faculty members who are [women](http://kieranhealy.org/files/misc/phil-by-discipline.pdf). Indeed, recent studies show that women only comprise about [28% of tenure track and only 23% of non-tenure track](https://women-in-philosophy.org/data/faculty) professional philosophers, and the number of women of color is significantly lower, as is the representation of other [minority](https://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.com/2017/12/philosophy-undergraduate-majors-arent.html) groups in philosophy. While there are many possible explanations for this lack of [diversity](https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:yiWiLUEZBVMJ:https://philarchive.org/archive/DOHWIT+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-b-1-ab), one of the main causes is that few women and other minorities choose to major in and graduate with a bachelor’s degree in philosophy. Indeed, over the last two decades only about [30-34%](https://dailynous.com/2017/12/09/women-majoring-philosophy-schwitzgebel/) of all bachelor degrees in philosophy were awarded to women.

In my own classes, I have encountered the kind of resistance and hesitation to studying philosophy that these studies indicate. When teaching at the Lone Star College System in Houston, TX, I had many first-generation college students from predominately Hispanic backgrounds who were hesitant to take more philosophy classes despite their budding philosophical interests. These students told me that majoring in philosophy was not a path to success that they envisioned other majors like business or engineering would provide. I encountered similar attitudes when teaching at UMass, Amherst. In my Medical Ethics classes, several female students expressed an interest in taking more philosophy classes but felt that it would not fit into their science degrees and their ultimate career goals as nurses and doctors. Of course, this resistance can be partially combatted by showing students the studies which indicate that studying philosophy is valuable in promoting the critical thinking skills that many employers desire. These studies include those which show that philosophy students do well on a range of [standardized tests](https://dailynous.com/2021/07/14/philosophy-majors-high-standardized-test-scores/) and have higher [mid-career salaries](https://dailynous.com/2019/01/03/philosophy-majors-make-money-majors-humanities-field/) as compared to other disciplines in the Humanities. But there are other ways of making philosophy more appealing to a wider range of students.

I believe, along with many philosophers who study the lack of diversity in philosophy and inclusiveness promotion, that a better way to address and improve diversity and inclusion in philosophy is to make the study of philosophy more accessible, engaging, and relevant to students’ lives. Philosophy, and the critical thinking skills it requires, has enriched my life enormously and my goal in teaching is to show my students how it can enrich their lives too. While there are many ways to accomplish this, below I will explain which approaches I have used to promote diversity and inclusion at both the undergraduate and professional levels.

My overall teaching methodology is founded on what I take to be a crucial insight into effective and inclusive teaching: think about learning from the student’s perspective. Thinking from my student’s perspective has made me incorporate what I have observed from my many years of teaching, and learned at various teaching workshops I have attended, to create an in-class learning environment that values, respects, and prioritizes the voices of all students. For instance, at a teaching workshop at Wake Forest University, I learned the pedagogical value of think-pair-share exercises. Such small group activities allow students to engage with the material at their own pace and encourage peer learning. This benefits both introverted and extroverted learners. For example, I have asked students to turn to their neighbor and come up with challenges to Peter Singer’s central argument in “Famine Affluence and Morality.” After 5-10 minutes of small-group student discussion, students then share challenges to Singer’s argument to the class and I play devil’s advocate by replying to these challenges on Singer’s behalf. Giving students this time to grapple with the course material has many significant short-term and long-term benefits. For the short-term, this practice has the benefit of making in-class discussions more productive and lively. Because students get to first “try out” their ideas with the students sitting next to them before they or others participate in open class discussions, this allows students to feel reassured that other students want to hear their thoughts, and/or prevent students from publicly displaying they have misunderstood the material. For the long-term, some students tell me that they remember our subsequent discussions many semesters after they have taken this class with me. This demonstrates retention of course material and demonstrates how memorable these in-class interactions can be.

Also, at this workshop I learned ways to promote classroom discussions on difficult or controversial topics without singling out students or their beliefs. For instance, one exercise has students anonymously write down answers to difficult and sometimes provocative questions on index cards (e.g. when, if ever, do you think abortion is permissible? Justify your answer). I then either “shuffle” them around the classroom or have them all passed forward to me to preserve their anonymity. In the former case, I have students read the answers on cards and discuss them amongst themselves, or in the latter case, I will read the answers out and we will discuss them as a class. This practice is helpful in giving a voice to students who are reluctant to participate by discussing and often critiquing what another student thinks in the class without any student being attached to or identified with a particular viewpoint. This workshop also inspired me to create a different kind of in-class activity for my students. After a brief course lecture on some philosophical claim, problem, paradox, etc., I will ask students to break into groups and create a fictional story or conversation about how one might have come up with this claim, problem, paradox, etc. For example, I have asked students to do this with the Ship of Theseus thought experiment, and I have found this activity to bring out the many complicated issues, objections, and questions surrounding identity, change over time, and persistence. Indeed, this activity accomplishes this in a way that is more organic, and student led than my presentation of this material would be in lecture format. For example, one student at Wake Forest University told a story of someone working on restoring an old classic car with new parts and, when trying to sell the car for a profit, encountered some difficulties convincing would-be buyers that the restored car was still “classic.”

To gain a more accurate view of my student’s perspective on various aspects of my class, I send out a mid-semester survey in which students anonymously answer questions concerning how they think the class is going, what they like or dislike about the class, and what they want changed or to stay the same. I then adjust the course to better fit the needs of each individual class. This method of acquiring student feedback makes sure any concern a student has is heard by me during the semester. Students tell me that they really enjoy being able to affect how the class is taught and having their voices heard in a way that does not put them in difficult or awkward positions involving telling their professor their thoughts on a class.

Also, thinking from my student’s perspective has allowed me to design assignments which are accomplishable by students who require accommodations, but which remain intellectually rigorous. For example, in my intro courses I often provide students with reading questions for all our assigned readings. These reading questions are designed to help students who are new to philosophy better understand and comprehend our course readings in a way that will hopefully enhance student interest, engagement, and participation. For instance, the reading questions for Martin Luther King Jr’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” include: According to King, what are the four students one must take before engaging in non-violent protest? How does he justify obeying some laws while disobeying others? What are some of the criteria he mentions to distinguish an unjust from a just law? For assessment, students are required to turn in a certain number of these reading questions within blocks of time on our class schedule. This flexibility allows students the freedom to turn in these assignments when it fits their often-busy schedules and thus helps to alleviate the stress associated with this kind of assignment. Furthermore, in my logic classes I provide students with study guides and with practice exams which mirror the actual exams. This also helps to alleviate student’s stress while simultaneously enhancing student learning.

For my midterms and finals in my intro classes I often give students the choice to either take an in-class exam or turn in a take-home paper. While both assignments start with the same 4-5 prompts, the exam option has students only answer two of these prompts. However, students do not know which prompts will be tested until exam day, so they must study the material in all the prompts. In contrast, the paper option has students choose only one of these prompts, but students are also required to read an additional article, which I provide, that we did not cover in class and answer additional prompt questions for this reading. So, while both options have students answer a total of two prompts, the nature of both kinds of assessment is different. For the exam option, it is more about knowing a large portion of the material covered in class; while for the paper option, it is more about delving into a particular topic while applying critical reading and writing skills. Structuring my midterms and finals with varied assignments and assessment methods has three prominent benefits. First, it allows students the freedom and autonomy to do the kind of work they want to do in a way that hopefully alleviates stress in their lives. Second, it allows students to demonstrate their understanding in ways that align with their strengths. And third, it has the practical benefit of helping students with learning difficulties and accommodations complete these assignments in a way that does not overburden them (or me) in requiring changes in schedules or deadlines. In short, thinking about learning from the students’ perspective is instructive in designing courses which are conducive to identifying and meeting the specific needs of each individual student and better ensures that no student is left behind.

To also ensure that no student is left behind, on occasion I have provided some flexible learning environments. For example, for a hearing-impaired student in my Medical Ethics class at UMass Amherst I helped acquire a stenographer who would come to class to type-out everything said on a computer screen so that this student could follow along with class lecture and discussions. This example highlights my commitment to making sure students have all the resources they need to meet their learning goals and understand our course materials. For this reason, I ensure that all course materials, including textbooks, articles, and online resources, are accessible to students on our course website (via Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, etc.). When requested I provide alternative formats of materials, such as digital versions and audio transcripts, to accommodate students with these needs. I also typically provide my lecture notes and/or all PowerPoint presentations to my students on our course website. In my experience, providing these materials allows students to focus on understanding the material in a way that frees them from making sure they have acquired the important information (via hurriedly writing notes in-class). While this practice has some drawbacks, in my view this is outweighed by its benefits. These include more in-class engagement, more time for discussions and activities which better facilitate student understanding. Additionally, providing these materials has been instrumental in ensuring that all students, especially those with disabilities, find class more accessible and hospitable to their different learning styles and abilities.

Moreover, to promote diversity and foster inclusiveness in my courses I have attempted to incorporate philosophers from a multitude of backgrounds, genders, and races in my course readings. It is hypothesized that including more underrepresented authors in the course readings can foster inclusiveness by demonstrating to students that such minority groups belong and are welcome in philosophy. This also combats the stereotype that philosophy is solely the domain of white men. For these reasons, nearly 50% of my course readings in my Medical Ethics syllabi are written by women. Additionally, it is also hypothesized that implicit cognitive biases against minority groups can make philosophy classrooms a hostile environment that dissuades such groups from taking more philosophy classes. For this reason, I make an effort in my classes to make such students feel more welcome by encouraging them to speak-up in class and by providing encouraging feedback in class and on their assignments. For instance, I will sometimes “check-in” on students who seem to be struggling or who seem to be engaged in class lecture/discussions but who are reluctant to participate. Furthermore, in my classroom I attempt to make class time more congenial to all my students by deemphasizing philosophy’s notorious aggressive argumentative style. Instead of “attacking” or “objecting” to what another student has said in class or believes, students are encouraged to “consider” alternative viewpoints as “live hypotheses” that are not necessarily any student’s all-things-considered position. On the first day of class I tell my students that I will often play devil’s advocate when considering a view and they are encouraged to do the same.

To foster diversity and promote inclusiveness at the professional level I have made an effort to cite more women in the papers I send off for publication. Additionally, I have made an effort to attend conferences where women and other minority groups are fairly represented. Essentially, to make academic philosophy a more hospitable place requires being an *ally* to minority groups. This includes having a commitment to promoting diversity and inclusiveness by actively defending and advocating for such minority groups. This can be done by encouraging the diversity efforts made by the APA and such groups as Minorities and Philosophy (MAP). But this also requires the more difficult task of constructively addressing the conscious and unconscious biases within the discipline of philosophy.

In conclusion, I am committed to making the discipline of philosophy a more hospitable place by promoting diversity and fostering inclusiveness at the undergraduate and professional levels. In the future, I hope to learn more about and contribute more to diversity and inclusiveness in and outside the classroom by being an ally to underrepresented groups.