

# Phil 239: Teaching Methods in Philosophy

## List of Strategies

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### Notes:

- Apply these strategies depending on context; sometimes some will be helpful but others will not
- Do not underestimate the following often neglected strategies:
  1. The “Think, pair, share” technique for enhancing participation
  2. The value of practice exercises and example solutions, especially for formal philosophy
  3. Anonymous surveys for eliciting feedback that students would not give non-anonymously

### List of strategies:

#### 1. Planning and running a section:

- a. **Consider context:** When planning a section, consider the context, including the following:
  - i. The aims of the course
  - ii. The content of recent lectures or readings
  - iii. The content in coming weeks
  - iv. Upcoming assignments
- b. **Identify section aims:** Given the context, identify the aims or end outcomes of the section, and plan the section by working backwards from there
- c. Integrate any of the following components, depending on the context:
  - i. **Identification of issues from students:**
    1. At the beginning of section, perhaps using the “Think, pair, share” technique, go around the classroom to ask each student 1) whether they found any content unclear from the readings or lectures and 2) what they want to get out of that day’s section
  - ii. **Content clarification:**
    1. Give presentations or facilitating discussions to clarify content from lectures or readings (like content on falsifiability [here](#))
    2. When gauging which content to clarify, ask less discomfoting questions like “Who would like a refresher/reminder about [topic X]?” instead of “Who did not understand [topic X]?”
  - iii. **Critical discussion:**
    1. Ask students to discuss *evaluative* questions about course content, such as whether they agree or disagree with ideas, or what the strengths and weaknesses of those ideas are
  - iv. **Discussion of upcoming assignments:**
    1. Clarify assignment instructions and grading criteria (like [here](#))
    2. Provide examples of what a good and not-so-good assignment submission would look like
  - v. **Practice exercises and solutions**
    1. Provide practice exercises and example solutions for exercises similar to assignment exercises, especially for formal philosophy (like [here](#))

- d. **Handout:** To facilitate planning and execution of the section plan, describe the plan on a handout and distribute it to students (like examples for all the courses [here](#))
2. **Increasing participation:**
- a. **Ice-breaker exercises:**
    - i. Fact-sharing:
      - 1. Ask students to share answers to questions like “What is your name? Something funny or interesting that happened in your week?”
    - ii. Fun exercises:
      - 1. Ask students to answer questions like “Which would win in a fight: 100 duck-size horses or one horse-size duck?”
  - b. **“Think, pair, share” exercises:**
    - i. Ask participants to 1) think about a question individually, then 2) pair up and discuss the question in pairs and then 3) share their thoughts with the whole class, either as a pair or a free-flow discussion
    - ii. This works wonders, and I do it almost every class (like points 1 and 5 [here](#))
  - c. **Encourage contributions from unspoken students:**
    - i. To encourage participation from other students who have not spoken yet, affirm the value of past contributions and ask for contributions from others
    - ii. Example: “Thanks a lot for those comments. They touched on important and interesting topics. I would also like to hear from others who have not spoken yet. Would anyone like to share?”
  - d. **Create an open, welcoming environment:** With your words and actions, create an environment of openness to contributions of others, of curiosity and of lack of judgment
  - e. **Give time:** Give students time to process questions so they eventually can share
  - f. **Voting:** Ask students to vote on topics as an easy way of participating
  - g. **Debates:** Have debates in class, or exercise where groups examine different angles
  - h. **Pre-section reactions:** Request students to submit reactions to the readings or to assigned questions so they have prepared opinions they can share in class
  - i. **Affirm value:** Make students feel valued when giving their contributions so they want to contribute more by:
    - i. Affirming positives in what they say
    - ii. Referring to their opinions in discussions later on so they know they were heard
  - j. **Grade participation:** Grade participation so students are incentivized to participate
  - k. **Self-grading participation:** Ask participants to grade their own participation
3. **Grading:**
- a. **Grading criteria:** Have clear grading criteria, both to help you think about how to evaluate assignments and to help students know how to do well/achieve good grades
  - b. **Timing:** Time yourself for each assignment so you do not spend too long
  - c. **Constructive comments:** Phrase critical comments tactfully and constructively: for example, say “It would be good to make this clearer” or “There is room to clarify this” instead of “You are being unclear”
  - d. **Avoiding exhaustive criticism:** Do not always give all possible critical comments: sometimes this can overwhelm students and students are unlikely to address all of them
  - e. **Positive comments:** Aim to mention positive aspects of the student work
4. **Mental health:**

- a. **Acknowledge mental health:** Acknowledge early in the quarter that we (as humans) can experience mental health challenges and explain that you are open to accommodating these issues
  - b. **Flexible deadlines:** Allow students flexibility with deadlines (e.g. five free late-days) in case they need extensions for reasons they do not want to discuss
  - c. **Alert to signs:** Be alert to signs of potential mental health problems, including not submitting assignments on time and not attending class
  - d. **Email check-ins:**
    - i. If concerned, send an email to the student pointing out that, say, they have not submitted recent assignments and ask whether “everything is okay?”
    - ii. Avoid asking them unsolicited questions about mental health issues, as this may make them uncomfortable (and it is not your job)
  - e. **Refer students:** If necessary or useful, refer students to Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS)
    - i. Website: <https://vaden.stanford.edu/caps>
    - ii. 24/7 Urgent Support Hotline: 650-723-3785
  - f. **Contact staff:** If you (qua teachers) are worried about an undergraduate, contact:
    - i. Philosophy SSO:
      - 1. Karina Ajluni
      - 2. [kajluni@stanford.edu](mailto:kajluni@stanford.edu)
      - 3. 650-723-1404
    - ii. Vanessa Sutter
      - 1. Assistant Dean of Programmatic and Student Support
      - 2. [vsutter@stanford.edu](mailto:vsutter@stanford.edu)
5. **Miscellaneous strategies:**
- a. **Anonymous feedback form:** Have an online anonymous feedback form where students can always provide feedback
  - b. **Reading/assignment-burden assessment:** When new assignments or readings are given, ask students for anonymous feedback (on a survey) about how long the assignments or readings took; teachers often unduly burden students by underestimating how difficult or time-consuming the readings or assignments are
  - c. **Short assignments:** If students are new to philosophical essays, encourage the development of clear and rigorous thinking through short multiple assignments (like [here](#) and [here](#)) instead of a few essays: multiple short assignments provide more opportunities student practice, TA feedback and improvement than the equivalent amount of words in fewer long essays (although one or two long essays may still be in the course content)