

**N.A.J. Taylor**  
Statement of Teaching Philosophy

As a teacher, my goal is to give rise to a love of learning that may transcend the classroom. Since I began lecturing in 2007, I have found that lasting learning outcomes are achieved when I enable students to locate and harness their personal passions and scholarly interests. Teaching is a skill that I have developed in both university and industry settings, in programs across the Humanities and Social Sciences. To illuminate my teaching philosophy, this statement intersperses a small number of concrete examples from the classroom with the voices of my former students.

To guide my [design of courses](#), I use active, discovery, and experiential learning combined with iterative and circular (i.e. from self, peer and teacher) reflection and feedback. My approach to teaching therefore marries the ideals of a liberal arts education with the skills necessary to solve intellectual and practical puzzles that students will confront in their own work and lives. This means that I often choose readings, structure classes and design assessments that enable students to connect scholarship with contemporary yet enduring concerns, perspectives and problems. This contextual approach to learning is not without difficulties. For example, I teach Normative International Theory as a way of thinking about three types of relationships: (1) what “we” do to “them” and what “they” do to “us”; (2) what “they” do to each other; and (3) what “everyone” does to “everyone” else. Simply put, International Ethics explores the limits of human duty in relation to distant strangers. Of course, who precisely “we” and “they” are in the classroom isn’t so straightforward. As a group of peoples, I am aware that my students (and I) each have different identities, concerns, personal narratives, and so on. Whilst the contours of these commonalities and differences can be explored to great effect in open classroom discussion, doing so requires a prior commitment to mutual respect *and* listening. I prefer to employ role-plays and simulations—where students are actors—to facilitate student explorations of ideas and perspectives that are otherwise different from their own. These role-plays and simulations may be of world-historical events, or more abstractly, ways to contextualize ideas in their contemporary settings. The combination of self, peer and teacher feedback that is peculiar to simulations and role-plays empowers students to navigate complex issues as a group, but also as individuals through self-reflection during and after class.

To support this pedagogical approach in class assignments, I variously use oral and written assignments which are assessed only after a sustained period of iterative brainstorming and feedback sessions in private consultation with myself (or my teaching staff). Crucially, this feedback mechanism is both ongoing and interacts with feedback provided to each student as well as the wider group as the semester progresses. Students are supplied a marking rubric in the first week of semester for every assignment so that they are aware of what is being assessed, and with what relative weighting. More practically, I assign exploratory and research papers that require topic clearance by way of the submission of both an annotated bibliography and a one-page outline for discussion in one-on-one consultation in the first third of the course. This allows me to have students reflect on their argument as well as the writing and research process. For this purpose, I distribute a set of notes that I published in 2008 on learning titled “Reading and writing for the humanities and social sciences: How to interpret and marshal the literature, rather than be terrorized by it”, which I have found brings many of the issues and anxieties students face out into the open in our one-on-one sessions. Based on the feedback that I have received, I know that my student’s approach their assessments with a strong grasp of what an assessment entails as well as its learning objectives, so they may focus on learning.

To achieve these goals in the classroom, I variously employ discovery-learning activities, combined with traditional lectures and smaller group breakout sessions, to accommodate a wider range of learning styles. My teaching reflects a belief in active, discovery education as a path toward more meaningful learning outcomes, and my experience in diverse classroom environments has led me to devise strategies for teaching theory by through supplemental applied cases in the first five to ten minutes of each class (and visa versa). For example, to help students to understand the limitations of the expanding ethical circle of moral concern in Western philosophy across space and time, I have students work together in pairs to devise alternative ethical geometries before the concept is unpacked fully together in a larger group. One real-world example I often have students consider (for my [Nuclear Humanities](#) intensive, for e.g.) is the task of isolating high-level nuclear waste from people and the biosphere for the next 100,000 years. The needs and priorities of present human beings (e.g. to consume nuclear energy) are then

weighed against the needs and wants of future generations, who may view uranium as a locus of harm or as a valuable yet finite resource. During these group research or discussion times, I move through the classroom, answering questions and directing the discussions by quizzing groups to gauge what is being collectively learned, and who is being left behind. The smaller groups are then brought back together to discuss their findings with the whole class having contextualized and rehearsed the ideas in smaller groups. Research has shown that complementing traditional lectures and readings with experiential learning techniques not only caters to a wider range of learning styles, but also requires thinking differently about the same topic matter. I have found that these five or ten-minute exercises stimulate class discussion and, over time, tend to engender confidence in students' own interpretation of texts and ideas.

We often learn something best when we teach it to others. For this reason, I use a peer teaching assignment called a "jigsaw" in each of my classes. For this assignment, smaller peer learning groups set out to specialize in an assigned idea, text or case study. The students collaborate on the task set within smaller breakout groups to determine: (1) the central aspects to be learned from the task set; and (2) the best strategies to teach what has been learned to their other classmates who have specialized in a different topic. In this way, every student in the class is dependent on the others for their success in learning and teaching the material, but the grades are based on both the group presentation and an individual paper that is submitted following the jigsaw exercise. The purpose of this "jigsaw" procedure is to provide an alternative method of introducing new material besides reading and lecturing; to create information interdependence among student peers both as individuals and as a group; and to ensure that participants have opportunities to orally rehearse and cognitively process the information being learned. Since each group works on their research and presentation together throughout the term, learning is shown to be a social, shared exercise, and not merely a solitary one.

My course evaluations are consistently above four-and-a-half (4.5) from five (5) across all the institutions where I have taught. Although no quantitative data is available for each of the guest lectures that I have delivered in North America and Australia, what I do know is that I have been invited back by colleagues in subsequent years where practicable to do so, and in most instances this request is based on informal feedback from students. Indeed, I have found the qualitative feedback that I have received to be the most instructive for my own development as a teacher and mentor. Two examples from my teaching evaluation in 2008 [4.5+ from 5] that best capture the outcomes of my teaching are:

"Nicholas was incredibly approachable and engaging. He went to great effort to draw quieter students into the discussion, and he fostered a friendliness in the classroom which allowed everyone to feel comfortable enough to voice their opinions."

"Nicholas was always open and approachable and was willing to be flexible with his consultation methods and times."

Ten years later, two more recent examples of student feedback from the 2017 cohort at The University of Melbourne [4.75 from 5] include:

"I really wanted to give your course the highest recommendation possible [...] everyone that I spoke to said it was one of the best courses they had taken at university, and were so glad they chose it, and I agree. Thank you for all your hard work, enthusiasm, and willingness to engage with the course on such a meaningful level."

"I'd like to thank you for the way in which you treated the assignments, your generosity isn't something I've experienced much before by Melbourne University lecturers."

In lieu of a conclusion, I would like to say a word about my teaching and mentoring style. Though this image many students have of me as an "approachable" and "engaging" teacher is partly down to my own individual character, I also know that how I build an image of respect and trust with students is the result of experience, planning and a deliberate pedagogy—it's hard work. The twin principles of mutual listening and respect are key aspects of my teaching philosophy that come to define my classroom environment and my students' learning experience. In my class, learning is a process in which we not only gain knowledge and understand a topic, but also about each other and ourselves. Various combining active and discovery learning with reflective and iterative feedback is the best way that I have found to both support diversity and engender a common purpose in the classroom.