

Upper-level philosophy classes tend to contain proportionately more affluent white males than lower-level classes. And the proportions snowball. The more affluent white males, the more others can experience each class as alienating. They can experience the class as not for people like them, since most of the people in the class aren't like them. Jokes about class composition feed into that alienation – and those jokes become more likely the more striking the class composition becomes. Other parts of the class can compound the alienation. For instance, the detailed feedback essential to philosophical growth can seem like further evidence that the class isn't for people like them. It's easy to look at that feedback and overestimate how well everyone else in the class is doing, and it's especially easy for someone who's already uncertain about their place in the class. I design my service and teaching to undermine the ways that class composition snowballs.

I spent a year teaching at Shandong University in Jinan, China. Teaching there put me in a position to help integrate the world of English-speaking philosophy more closely with aspiring philosophers in mainland China. Linguistic and institutional barriers combine to largely lock them out of the English-speaking world – for instance, many applicants don't think of their “personal statements” in the way that admissions committees do. I've continued to work with students from Shandong after leaving. In the past three years, nine of my former students have received funded offers for graduate work in philosophy in North America, as my statement of mentoring describes in detail. (Three of them are female, and six male.) Students from Shandong help decenter white males who are native speakers of English; their contributions inside and outside the classroom are ongoing reminders that good philosophers needn't look any one way or have any one kind of background. And they bring a different range of perspectives and commitments to the classroom.

Comparatively privileged students feel more comfortable talking from the very beginning of the course, and it is easy for this pattern to perpetuate itself through the rest of the term. My teaching statement describes a technique for helping students monitor their understanding of the material that involves calling on groups at random by calling on particular students. This technique helps keep a wide range of students engaged. It first helps diversify participation just by brute-forcing it. Since I'm picking names at random, the people who are talking are as diverse as the class as a whole. (Even though I allow anyone in the group to answer, the person whose name I select almost always answers.) My technique also helps in a more subtle way, too. The most talkative students already have an outlet for describing what they're thinking: they describe it to their partner. When we start working through the material as a class, they're usually ready to sit back and listen to other people, since they've already had an opportunity to say what they think. And when class is small enough, I circulate the room and talk with the different groups about what they're thinking. That lets the most talkative students feel heard, without them disrupting the rest of the class.

Philosophy's problems with representation across race, gender, and ethnicity are especially deep-seated because they intersect with other ways that students can be alienated from their classes. First-generation college students can find the transition to college classes jarring; for instance, several of my first-generation Hispanic students at USC started the semester thinking that it was inappropriate for them to ask questions in the class, because their questions would burden other students and me. My focus on discussion, especially when I circulated the room during the discussions, helped recalibrate their expectations. (One of these students said that, in her first semester at USC, mine was the only class in which she felt comfortable asking a question.) Underarticulated expectations – like the expectation that they “write a persuasive paper” – can also alienate students. Each semester I've taught, I've added more time explicitly describing the expectations for papers; my teaching dossier contains the current versions of the written material that I provide. But almost all the work articulating expectations happens in the classroom. It's only as I've been teaching my own classes that I've come to appreciate just how much of a barrier it is when the expectations are left unarticulated. Students can also be alienated from philosophy classes in particular when the classes prescind from religious commitments the students find important. Several of groups underrepresented in philosophy are more religious than white men; 80% of Black women, for instance, report religion as very important to them, with only 43% of white men agreeing. I encourage students to draw on their religious commitments in class discussion and in their papers. Several Black women became significantly more more engaged at the points in class where I start discussing religious commitments. I plan to incorporate womanist theologians like Katie Cannon and Emilie Townes in my US-based introductory ethics and social/ political classes.