

---

## Teaching Statement

**Orlin Vakarelov**

---

My approach to teaching is guided by one overarching maxim: *success in education is measured by the skills, knowledge, and maturity the students have after they leave your class*. This is a truism, yet it is all too often ignored, and replaced by short term “success” measures. Education is replaced by edutainment; deep provocative knowledge is replaced by quick-feedback drills; building maturity is replaced by cynical paternalism. And, learning curves become shallower and shallower. The hardest task of teaching, I have found, is staying true to the maxim in light of changing cultural expectations about the role of the classroom, and, unfortunately, some perverse incentives in higher education. Below I will outline how I manage, with few failures here and there, to achieve that.

Education is process that demands a meticulous effort. It requires lots of little steps – lots of particulars. Large goals and strategies are swell, but they happen only as side effects of individual ponderings, resolution of confusions, or little insights. The task, then, is making sure that the students get *this* particular idea, *that* concept or connection. The trick is *don't try to teach philosophy!* – let philosophy happen. Instead, explain why Socrates thought that one should be just even if treated unjustly, or why Kant thought that the categorical imperative is a good moral principle for rational creatures, or what Kuhn meant by normal science, or why predicate logic is decidable but first order logic is not. I remember, I was teaching about Mill's *no harm principle*, and a student, many weeks later, told me that as a result her opinion about gay marriage changed. For a brief moment, then, she became a philosopher. She understood something deep – something one cannot test for. Philosophy happened to her.

The most important skill an educator can offer is educational maturity – the ability of the student to take control of her education. At one point the student must stop being a student and become a learner. A learner can take a book and learn from it without the help of an educator, and without communicational wizardry of the author. Some of the smartest ideas come from poor orators. The effort of converting the ideas into a form that can be understood easily must be borne by the learner – the learner must become her own teacher. Gaining educational maturity is a birthing process – it comes with birth pains and it leaves birth marks. It comes with struggles, frustrations on the side of the student, and ironically, it requires a strong support from an educator. Shallow learning curves are not helpful here. They delay the process and increase the dependence on an instructor. I try, whenever possible, to push my expectations beyond what the students think they can accomplish comfortably. Ultimately, they accomplish it, and those that do not accomplish everything are still better off than otherwise. Students, especially in introductory classes, find my classes difficult, and my initial grading hard. Some feel frustrated, and occasionally discouraged, but they stick on – they have to. But, this is a good sign. At the end, however, I see the incredible progress the students make. Some may not realize it at this point, or ever, but the skill and knowledge is with them – they can analyze argument better, understand and appreciate complex philosophical ideas, write better critical papers, etc.