Tarik Wareh
Teaching Statement (Summer 2011)

In dedicating myself to teaching, I am involved in a continual process of learning about myself, about my students, and about the world we endeavor to understand better each time we begin a ten-week course together. This follows my conception of a liberal arts education as a foundation for lifelong curiosity about oneself and one’s world that supports a desire to understand, appreciate, and create with enlarged and deepened sympathies and perspectives. In this statement I hope to clarify how I have experimented and innovated, seeking authentic challenges for myself and my students even when the results would not be guaranteed, and constantly learning from successes and setbacks. I will also look forward and account for how my work in recent years has prepared the way for many years of continued progress in contributing to the Union community the most rigorous, exciting, and eye-opening learning experiences that I can.

Much of my energy at Union has gone into developing new courses. During the six terms under review, nine of the thirteen courses I taught were entirely new to me, and I significantly modified two others (GRK102/S08 had new readings, and PHL-CLS242/F10 was a completely rethought syllabus). In the previous period (Fall 2005–Fall 2007), the majority of my courses were also entirely new to me, including such major projects as courses on Presocratic philosophy (“Poetry and the Cosmos”) and Medieval Latin (a field covering a thousand years of literary history, which undergraduates rarely get the opportunity to study, and in which I plan future offerings). Such fields are not obviously related to my main research projects, but they reflect deep intellectual interests, on which I consider it a privilege to be able to draw in my teaching. While I will continue to innovate, my future courses will be built more and more on a foundation of repeated experience (I will not repeat the three new preparations of Spring 2009!), and there are several fundamental principles that have run through these disparate courses. Among the constant strengths students have recognized in my courses are my careful course plans, my accessibility, my enthusiasm, and my willingness to challenge them and take them deeply and knowledgeably into difficult material.

Language teaching (literature in the original and first-year language)

Greek and Latin give me the highest satisfaction of my core goal as a teacher—offering students deep challenges, many-sided experiences of the textual evidence for ancient culture, and a thorough entry into how the world appears in the terms of another language and as interpreted by the scholar’s critical method. The study of Greek and Latin is one of our department’s most unique contributions to the range of intellectual experiences available to a Union student, and maintaining and strengthening it is an important priority for me. I have developed a first-year Greek teaching method that, by beginning with oral conversation and ending with sight readings in a wide range of Greek texts, allows students to get beyond experiencing an ancient language as merely a puzzle on the page. For my students, the goal is not simply a finished English translation, but to grasp how the meaning lives and breathes in the original ancient text. In upper-level Greek courses—Spring 2009’s “Lyric Poetry” is a good example—my students can expect to achieve advanced insights into how the language works, acquaintance with the philologist’s expert toolkit, and the ability to make their own authoritative interpretations of ancient social and cultural realities. By national standards, having undergraduates spend several weeks reading the difficult praise poetry of Bacchylides and Pindar stands out as unusually ambitious, and in
“Lyric Poetry” I helped the students expand their comfort zone to achieve this. I believe those students of ours who have gone on to become Latin teachers and Ph.D. students in comparative literature and Classics got an important part of what they needed in such courses. In the same way, my individual research students have undertaken challenges beyond the normal curriculum, including interdisciplinary connections to such areas as mathematics, computer science, and Near Eastern history and religions.

I have reached a wider audience in my two advanced Latin courses so far. In my Winter 2011 course on Virgil’s *Aeneid*, students worked hard on traditional language skills but undertook a wide variety of projects intended to make them think in other, new ways. Students stretched their linguistic muscles by participating in the Latin Dependency Treebank project (an online framework for diagramming sentences to create a queryable database of syntactic structures); this involved the considerable challenge of learning the terms of dependency grammar, which was rewarded when we later were able to prove to ourselves the value of such advanced analytic terms as “verbal attribute” and “non-governed complement.” Even in a case like this—an experiment I probably will not repeat because of its sheer complexity—I am in no doubt that the students who participated in the experiment will have lifelong insights into how language works because of it. Students in this course also got ample inspiration and encouragement to synthesize our material in less purely linguistic ways. I was particularly pleased to see high-quality projects in which students explored how Virgil’s poetic lens as the author of an epic of national identity could be related to other historical experiences (the burning of the Schenectady Stockade) and works of art (from Beatnik poetry to the films of David Lynch). Another student’s project, “Coppola’s Godfather: Echoes of Virgil’s *Aeneid* in *The Godfather*,” was later presented to a regional audience at Hamilton College. I look forward to playing a greater role in coming years in teaching beginning Latin, where the larger student audience demands a special blend of popularizing fun and linguistic precision.

Recent new contributions to general education: FYP and SRS

I measure my successes according to the evidence that I have enabled and provoked students to reach high standards and challenge themselves. By this measure, my Winter 2011 First Year Preceptorial (“The Author as Sage”) can count several successes, together with indications for future improvements, and serves as a good example of how I have confronted myself and students with demands that awaken us to new possibilities. I voluntarily sought FYP as an important opportunity, despite its well-known challenges.

I wanted the first-year students to understand from the beginning of their college experience that their education can be more than meeting narrowly prescribed expectations, a kind of performance in which the students are often well trained and most comfortable. For this reason I included in the course opportunities for them to choose their own direction and to serve as each other’s collaborators and discussants. This style of learning was made possible by the small class size of FYP and led to the development of ideas and arguments that better realized their own commitments and expectations of themselves. I believe that what students create to share with their fellow students not only enriches the academic atmosphere of the campus (it is a reason why I will be pushing in the future, not only for in-
class self-presentation, but also campus-wide class performances) but also makes them more actively involved in self-education as a pursuit not confined to their classes. Students had two weekly assignments for peer response—a weekly paragraph of evidence-based argument for in-class “workshopping” and weekly contributions to our “Emerson Aphorism Project.” The Emerson project (documented in the dossier) was less clearly leading to the kind of discussion and experimentation that would contribute to a higher standard of writing in the papers, so I substituted a close-reading exercise for it halfway through the term. The paragraph workshops, however, led us into impressively wide-ranging in-class interpretation and analysis of often difficult readings. They seemed to solve at a stroke the problem of sterile discussions that can plague this kind of required course. When I saw students debate and develop their ideas into an interesting discussion with multiple points of view, I considered this the best kind of feedback for our purposes, even if, despite my careful participation, it was not the kind of feedback some students expected.

My FYP deliberately offered students some quite challenging readings, including essayists with sweeping judgements about their world (from Simone Weil to Ralph Waldo Emerson, from Nietzsche to Theodore Parker, from David Foster Wallace to William James). Its premise was to confront students with a kind of writing they were very unlikely to have been interested in before. Yet in our discussions I saw students able to appreciate what Theodore Parker’s heterodox construction of a religion without creed and dogma had contributed to Martin Luther King’s “How Long, Not Long” speech, and by the time the class had reached the final reading, Kerouac’s *On the Road*, a novel that could easily have been read superficially by a class of freshmen as a glamorous and reckless adolescent experience, we were able to plumb the spiritual and meditative depths of this work with recourse to sources such as Whitman’s poetry.

The real test of these ventures was in the longer-form drafts and essays written for my detailed critique. Here I see significant successes resulting from a course design in which I facilitated students’ ability to find their own intellectual paths. In one final paper, “Anti-Wagnerism: How Progressive Metal is Saving the Music Industry,” the student, a prospective chemistry major, without any prior knowledge of German philosophy or nineteenth-century musical culture, was able to enter deeply and imaginatively enough into the problems and arguments of Nietzsche’s *The Wagner Case* to sustain her own original and well-argued cultural critique and reflection. Her achievement of a committed viewpoint on, and argument about, her own world is very likely to stick with her beyond the course and fuel her serious curiosity as a lifelong learner. To make this kind of progress more concrete, I have included in my teaching dossier two sets of “before” (paper #1, week 4) and “after” (paper #2, week 7) writing from this FYP. These are both from students whose interests lay far afield and whose first papers did not show their potential and promise as writers (one had felt quite discouraged after receiving the first paper back), but who were led by the design of the course to experiment ambitiously with much more specific evidence-based arguments. These second papers showed an acquired motivation to take seriously the ideas of John Ruskin—one of the authors whom I included in the course in order to force students outside of their literary and intellectual comfort zone. For students like these, this resulted in growth of their critical faculties and imaginative sympathies. Their commitment to their arguments about Ruskin shows a connection forged between our class’s literary discussions and arguments and their ongoing reflections on their own lives and worlds. I believe that, having experienced this connection, they will be opened up to a more complete experience of the liberal
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Arts education that lies before them. FYP is a difficult challenge, but I will be coming back to it, again by choice, in Winter 2012, with significant changes (in readings and the overall structure of the course and its assignments), but aiming to enhance the success of its fundamental ideas.

My Spring 2011 Sophomore Research Seminar (“The Ancient Historians”) was a more difficult assignment (resulting from last-minute changes in topic, format, and instructor), but I quickly developed a highly organized framework for student research into ancient historiography, with collaborative online bibliographies and interpretive brainstorming (using a course wiki, something I first tried the previous term for FYP), one-on-one feedback and consultations on the final project, and in-class workshopping of draft ideas on each week’s readings. In the final papers, I was able to see students who had chosen not only their own path of argument through the primary and secondary sources concerning the ancient historians, but who had also turned their hard work on the ancient historians into new perspectives on more recent issues, including twentieth-century international relations; the political sociology of fear as a force capable of creating unity and disunity; art criticism as a source of insight into historians’ use of emotional expressionism; partisan political propaganda; and the connections between contemporary U.S. practices surrounding death and ancient rulers’ pursuit of a “legacy.” I mention these as successes because I believe the enduring value of humanities studies includes their ability to change the student as an interpreter and analyzer of their world.

Embracing challenge and involving students in my research questions: Aristotle

Given my commitment to taking seriously students’ capacities for insight and understanding, I am interested in opening up new areas of challenge in the Union curriculum. Here my new course on Aristotle, taught twice so far in very different versions (Spring 2008 and Fall 2010), is a good example. The course drew a range of curious students with very different academic interests—from mathematics and science to literature and philosophy—who were plunged into the complexities of Aristotelian theory. Nothing would have been easier than avoiding the challenge and confusion of dealing with areas such as metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, but to do so would make the curriculum poorer and miss an opportunity to make visible the less obvious interconnections between classical antiquity and everything else students study at Union. For example, this course has been one avenue for encouraging interdisciplinary thought around the subject of biological theory, thus inspiring future courses and collaborations (see below). The difficult (but important) question that persists for me as I develop the third iteration of this course will be how to meet a general student audience with material of this kind.

Teaching Aristotle has also allowed me to share my scholarly experience more fully than has otherwise been possible outside of language courses. This is not only because of the kind of classroom discussion that results from the difficult and technical nature of the material, over which even experts disagree. It is also because I have been able to offer students readings and ideas that are highly appropriate to their own learning path, despite not being the normal fare of undergraduate courses. For example, in the Spring 2010 version, I reoriented the course toward the discussion of ethics and incorporated weekly readings from Aristotle’s *Protrepticus*. This dialogue, in which Aristotle sought to inspire young people of his time (the ancient equivalent of college students) to give their respect and devotion to philosophy, is uncommonly relevant and useful in figuring out the connection between
ethical and metaphysical theory and the more obviously pressing concerns of practical life. Yet the
dialogue survives only in fragments, and it is only because my work had led me to write about the
Protrepticus in my own book, and to become acquainted with the ongoing effort by other scholars to
reorganize the fragments into a more compelling whole, that I was able and willing to find a way for
students to benefit from studying it. The result is that students were able to make intelligent use of a
scholarly reconstruction—in fact, they reported that this was one of the more readable and intelligible
of our texts. They developed informed arguments about how Aristotle sought to borrow from
contemporary rivals such as Isocrates while defending the distinctiveness of his own school’s approach.
In other words, they were able to understand important issues in the history of philosophical thinking
that are still not widely discussed and appreciated by professional scholars.

I am aware that my natural inclination to “go deep” in the classroom carries risks and
challenges. It is normal in my classes that not everything is instantly digestible, and the relationship of
each part to everything else may not become clear as soon or as completely as both I and my students
want. I do strive to compensate for the difficulties that may arise from the way in which I involve
students in honest in-class exploration of difficult subjects. For example, I take measures to give
students a comfortable and regular framework. This is in my mind as I organize the course and
communicate its structure, and it leads me to begin, punctuate, and end our course meetings with
overviews, backward reflections, and anticipations. While very mindful, then, of the importance of
achieving clarity when it is appropriate and possible, I also try to remember that at times a degree of
confusion can indicate a productive grappling with the material, its difficulties, and the range of
contradictory ideas it can provoke. An intriguing recent study by the Harvard physics education
researcher Eric Mazur established the counter-intuitive result that students perform better on problems
in the end when they have passed through the very confusion they typically downgrade on evaluations.1
Clearly this point has its limits; my personal goal is to maintain the strength of my approach (never
allowing students the easy but illusory feeling of superiority that accompanies an inability to recognize
mistakes and difficulties) while continuing to improve the weaknesses that are not integral to those
successes (clarifying everything, including the structure and planning of our classes). I know this balance
is working the right way when I see—as recently in some of my students’ SRS papers—students who
have initially felt “lost” in the complexity of the material producing ambitious and attentive
interpretations. The goal is not discomfort for its own sake, but precisely to make students comfortable
with the uncertainty humanistic study requires. Students will benefit most from their humanities
studies when they are undeterred from attacking questions that lack perfect answers, confident in the
power of rigorous attention to the evidence and their own ability to use a multi-step argument to create
surprising and satisfying insights into their world and themselves.

Future directions: Performances and collaborations

Courses on less technical and more accessible subjects for the general education audience are a
crucial part of the Classics Department’s mission. Building on my experiences teaching ancient tragedy

1 Eric Mazur, “The scientific approach to teaching: Research as a basis for course design,” keynote and plenary address to the
(Winter 2008) and comedy (Spring 2009) in translation, I have developed a plan to teach a new course on ancient drama in performance that will serve this audience and do justice to several of my principles and goals as a teacher. Previously, I have had students use in-class performances to spur debate about a text’s meanings and to highlight the difficulties and possibilities that open up when modern readers encounter ancient cultural artefacts. In the comedy course I took this a step further and had student groups completely modernize ancient scenes, not only shifting these texts’ obsessive interest in daily life into the students’ American world, but also identifying how ancient comic techniques could be applied to our own preoccupations, social tensions, etc. Though a small part of my previous courses, this assignment gave students a vantage point from which to consider their own cultural landscape: how do our own entertainments engage—or not engage—with the kinds of questions that excited ancient audiences? What does this say about our own social, political, and cultural identity?

I anticipate several advantages that will make it worthwhile to develop a course more wholly oriented to performance questions. First, focusing on a single work and achieving the level of mastery necessary for a production will give students a motivation to achieve deeper expert knowledge about the ancient world and the literary practices of our dramatic texts. For example, in a survey course, we may speak only briefly about the nature of Aristophanes’ choral songs, but their poetic character and attitude to the audience will be a major topic in a performance-oriented course. Students will read related works but will have a more concrete mission in doing so: how do they illuminate the distinctive choices and possibilities of the main work to be produced in performance? While bringing students closer to ancient realities, this approach will also demand a more creative and committed discussion of the modern relevance of ancient works—how performers can communicate both the ancient dramas’ cultural difference and distance, and its points of intersection with our own experiences. Finally, while the course will remain a Classics course graded by Classics standards (i.e., students are graded on the explanations, arguments, care, and thought that underlie their dramatic approach, not on their skill as performers), it offers an effective way to persuade a wide variety of students that learning and reflecting on other cultures can involve a lot more than simply reading books and writing papers. I hope that this will animate their approach to future courses and assignments, as well as shaping their lifelong learning.

Finally, the class would have the opportunity to share with the whole campus community, in an amateur performance, the insights that have emerged from their deep engagement with the ancient material. This will make them accountable to a peer audience while enriching the quality of the campus’s learning environment.

Similar principles are also applicable to larger courses. For example, in Spring 2012 I will teach World Mythology, which is likely to be one of the largest courses on campus, taught in an auditorium. Such large audiences are very challenging, and I have thought a lot based on earlier trial and error about the right approach. My conclusion is that I can do the most with my own strengths by clearly communicating to students that each 105-minute period will present them with three “pieces” for which I will hold them accountable: understanding a reading from an ancient text; understanding an event or tradition in the modern reception or performance of ancient myth; and understanding a “big idea” (myth as political propaganda; the common Indo-European inheritance of myths in different cultures; comic myths as questioning and reinforcing social norms; etc.). This approach is calculated, again, to get students deeply involved with ancient realities, while fully participating in questions of their modern relevance, and bringing in accessibly my own expertise on topics they would not be likely
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to learn about from other instructors (for example, Indo-European myth and linguistics). I believe that these elements will realize significant improvements over the results I experienced when I taught Classical Mythology in Fall 2006.

Another future direction of growth for which I am well prepared is interdisciplinary courses. New approaches that involve the matter and methods of philosophy and fine arts are already interdisciplinary, but I also hope to extend the department’s outreach to the sciences. Up till now, this has taken a more archeological approach, with courses on engineering and the environment in antiquity. I would like to move into the more philosophical terrain of ancient medical and biological theory. The idea of a course in which students would read Dawkins vs. Gould (by a philosopher of biology) alongside Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity (a series of public lectures by an ancient philosopher) thrills me. I acknowledge the difficulty of such experiments, and I know they can lead to roadbumps and results that may not, at first, prove their promise. Even so, I believe that by stretching the Union curriculum into worthwhile new areas in this way, I can offer students intellectual experiences that will stay with them and live up to our mission to change how they see the world—despite their being “guinea pigs” the first time.

My teaching has involved direct collaboration with colleagues in several other departments, including guest lectures in philosophy courses; advising a Theater Department production and coordinating the Theater Studies cluster; co-advising student research projects with colleagues in Mathematics (a two-department thesis) and Computer Science (a project that contributed to the NSF-CPATH grant, was discussed as part of the proposed Union/IBM collaborations, and was presented by the student to a national audience of undergraduates and scholars in Washington, D.C.); and (for Fall 2011) serving as the “customer” whose project the Software Engineering course (CSC 360) will work on. I believe there is every chance of developing these alliances into significant curricular innovations, possibly including team teaching. I also have promoted these interdisciplinary collaborations to an extramural audience (in the October 2010 CAAS panel in New Jersey, with Classics colleagues and Union administrators) and maintain a website whose resources have been useful to faraway students and colleagues.

All of these interdisciplinary connections reflect who I am: a lifelong liberal-arts learner myself. I appreciate the Union College community as a place where I can share my manifold enthusiasms and intellectual projects with a wide range of students and colleagues. In this sense, the non-Classicist parts of my identity are important to the teacher and scholar I am and can be here: my love of math (which led me to take a college math course—differential geometry—for the first time the year before I began teaching at Union), my love of languages (including the great majority of those taught at Union and several others besides), my recent determination to teach myself to draw (meeting local artists in the Arts Building most weeks to stretch myself in a direction that does not come easily to me), my interest in sociological theory, and my amateur musical interests (which have led me to find out who on campus wants to talk about Irish jigs, Brazilian song, and Buxtehude cantatas). All of these interests have led me into deep conversations with colleagues; even if formal academic collaboration never follows, it helps me communicate to students how the questions and possibilities that arise in our courses relate to a wider intellectual landscape. For my own style of teaching, modeling to students an omnivorous appetite for liberal-arts learning is an important part of what I contribute to their education.