Guaranteed, you won’t fall asleep in one of Prof. Steven Gimbel’s philosophy classes. Even the titles of his courses — Einstein in Wonderland: Physics, Philosophy, and Other Nonsense; Bad Science, Wrong Science, and Pseudo-science; From Zero to Infinity: Philosophical Revolutions in the History of Numbers — are certain to wake you up.

Of course, Gimbel’s goal isn’t just to keep his students awake. He wants them to think in ways they haven’t thought before. As he put it, “I know what I know, and I want to know what everyone else knows and see how it all fits together as part of the big jigsaw puzzle we call reality.” He thrives on ideas, his own and those of others. In his classes he encourages students to question the world around them and express their views freely — and he does it all with considerable humor.

Despite the light-heartedness, Gimbel is also extremely serious. As an undergraduate at University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), he majored in both physics and philosophy, graduating in 1991. Subsequently, he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from Johns Hopkins University in 2000. His research focuses on the connection between scientific evidence and explanation, interpretations of the geometrical aspects of gravitation theories, and the development of 20th-century analytic philosophy. He is also interested in questions of sportsmanship arising from the Kasparov/Deep Blue chess match, the geometry of M.C. Escher’s...
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with five minutes where I say, “Auto mechanics to quantum mechanics, ask me any question at all.” I get a wide variety of questions, but a lot of them are on current events. “What do you think about this?” What I do is I try to give a well-reasoned, well-articulated answer where I say, “Here’s why the people on the other side disagree with me. Here is the argument in favor. Here’s why I think it’s a stronger one.” If you can model this sort of open discourse where you’re not indoctrinating but at the same time you’re not pulling back from saying, “Here’s what I believe and why I believe it”—then I think it’s a wonderful thing.

I have a number of very conservative students. I’m very much on the other side of the spectrum, but there’s a respect that they feel — even if I think they’re completely wrong and I have no problem telling them that. There’s a respect there that I take them seriously. And for that reason, I think politics belongs in the classroom if we can do a good job of modeling the type of discourse that we need to bring forward.

That’s what I do in “Was it Morally Good for You Too?” with respect to ethics. I think one of the really sad things is the movement in the ’80s, political correctness, which was designed originally to bring more voices to the table. The initial insight was that political power gives certain people a bigger microphone than others. But with that bigger microphone they’re drowning out voices that need to be heard. We need to do something to make sure all the voices are heard. Political correctness had a very noble goal, but what it turned into was this sort of prohibition on saying anything that might offend anybody. Of course, the most interesting points in the world have always offended lots of people. So what political correctness turned into — combined with our notion of puritanical correctness from the other side — is that we’re just simply not to talk about certain things at all, that the classroom is for facts only — as if we’re to open up the heads, pour in the facts, and just screw them back on.

Q. What do you particularly like about teaching?
A. The students here at Gettysburg are wonderful. You get very thoughtful, interesting people. It’s such a wonderful age where they’re open to possibility. My favorites are the ones who have no clue what they want to do. I tell them, “At this point you shouldn’t. Come here and play. It’s a buffet. Try everything. Try things you’ve never heard of.” I tell them, “Look, I’m a philosopher. As a student I’d never heard of philosophy. You’ve never heard of philosophy. You just take it because it fits your time slot or ‘Ooh! This sounds cool!’”

What you get here is open minds and playful minds. And that’s what I love more than anything else. I had a wonderful, wonderful first-year seminar last fall. I taught a class called, Einstein in Wonderland: Physics, Philosophy, and other Nonsense. Among other things, we read Alice in Wonderland. At first we looked at Newton and Descartes and the classical notion of sense. And then we looked at nonsense. And we had some of the most fascinating, intricate discussions.

I’ve taught Alice and Wonderland now probably six different times, but every time you find these students who discover different angles to take the discussion in places you never realized. And you find yourself at that point realizing, “Wait a minute. There’s some really interesting technical philosophy that you have just set up without knowing it.” Somehow we ended up in this magnificent magical place simply by playing.

We have very interesting, playful students and that’s what keeps me going.