Philosophy of Teaching Statement
James F. Patterson

When I was in middle school, a Maasai Warrior visited my class and gave a presentation in the auditorium. I vividly remember him asking a teacher standing in the back, who happened to be my mother, for some reason I do not recall, "what does practice make?" Expectedly, she responded, "perfect." He smiled and politely corrected her: "Incorrect! Practice makes improvement." It is an adage I have never forgotten, and I insist that all my students learn it, too.

In the context of language acquisition, "practice makes improvement" means that there is no such thing as perfect fluency, as evidenced by the fact, for instance, that we make lexical, morphological, and syntactical errors in our own native language regularly. While standards must be met to advance from one level to another, striving for "perfection" can dishearten students, including those who are otherwise doing well. With unrealistic expectations of perfection removed, I find that students are more willing to toss aside their notes and read straight from the unaltered text, even if this means stumbling while translating and forgetting the meaning of otherwise basic words. What may have resulted in embarrassment in front of peers becomes a helpful learning moment. I am particularly fond of asking students to predict final forms of words they have never seen before and award points for what I call "correct mistakes," or forms that may not be in the textbook but are morphologically possible (and in Greek, likely used by someone at some point in time, as we discover when we search for the form in the *TLG*). Moreover, knowing that mistakes are inevitable, that I myself make them, and that mistakes are often educational, group work in and outside the classroom develops well. Favoring improvement over perfection is one way I am able to foster a "community of inquiry" in my classroom.

The community of inquiry is a central feature of Philosophy for Children. While pursuing my MAT at UMass Amherst, I developed the Philosophy for Children model into a program for exploring ancient philosophical questions in the Latin classroom. I practiced it in my Latin III class at West Springfield High School and published an introduction to the project in the *New England Classical Journal* ("Latin Philosophy for Kids: Introducing Ancient Philosophy to the Latin Classroom, *NECJ* 34.1, 2007: 42-52). While valuable for philosophical debates, I find that the same framework works in philological contexts, as well. Admittedly, in this case there is (usually) a right answer at which we can securely arrive. Still, one value of the community of inquiry is that it gives students ownership of their contributions in the classroom, and thus makes the process of improving more rewarding, in a way that my simply telling students the correct answer does not.

In the case of graduate education, and in particular teacher training, "practice makes improvement" includes identifying personal strengths while diagnosing weaknesses, and discovering ways to compensate for them. Through staggered observations and one-on-one meetings about one's teaching, I hope to help new teachers become the teachers they are naturally inclined to be without insisting on a modelled performance that results in stagnant teaching personae. Successful teaching is not so much a matter of learning a correct method of instruction as it is versatility, refined instinct, and responsible experimentation. I readily acknowledge, too, that newcomers to the classroom often offer fresh perspectives on education that veterans may not see. In such instances, through the community of inquiry I encourage collaborative pedagogy and workshopping of ideas so we arrive at promising or feasible solutions to challenges in the actual classroom.