

Teaching Philosophy

A successful interaction with a student is one of the most rewarding experiences I know. Whether it is a tiny step towards understanding an inconsequential detail or one of those rare moments when it just clicks, I do not care, they are all equally rewarding. Of course, with these triumphs also comes the potential for a great deal of stress, frustration, and headache. But, that is part of the job, and without them, the good things would not seem so good. In the end, as with all teachers, my hope is that all students share the same level of interest in the material they are being taught that I do. This is an unrealistic hope. Ultimately, the success or failure of any teacher, and one in economics in particular, should be measured by two things: whether the students understand why the subject is useful for their lives, and whether they can apply it. If both of these hold true, then I know that they understand the material. What follows is how I go about accomplishing this.

The Pillar of Education

In my opinion, education has only one pillar: flexibility. All of the great teachers are flexible. For whatever reason, classes (even if it is the same course) will have differing personalities, differing abilities, and differing learning styles. In an ideal environment, encouraging class participation would always work. All of the students would get involved, and everyone would learn more and have more fun because of it. In an ideal environment, small group work would always result in the students teaching each other, with an equal division of the work load among them. But, the fact of the matter is that the ideal environment rarely exists. Sometimes participation can be encouraged, sometimes it cannot. Sometimes students work well in groups, sometimes they do not. Because of this, the only way to guarantee student success is for the teacher to approach every class, every subject, and every topic according to the needs of the students, not the teachers notions of how the class “should” be run.

Applying the Pillar

Being flexible does not mean approaching every course, subject, or student without a plan. A well designed syllabus is a crucial part of a well run class. And, although I believe in being flexible about the presentation of course content, I do not believe that the course content itself should be flexible. In any given course, there are things that I expect the students to learn. These things come from a mixture of what the discipline of economics has established as fundamental, where I believe the discipline is going, and what I think the students will find most interesting. In introductory courses, I usually use only a textbook, plus some supplemental readings from the popular press. If there are things that the textbook does not cover, I will write a set of notes for the students. In upper level courses, we use a mixture of textbooks and academic writing. I have found that students respond well to the challenge of reading the real thing, in addition to the textbook preparation. I also believe that it is important to stick to the timeline laid out in the syllabus. Not only does the course get confusing, but students get frustrated and lack interest if the course moves too slowly or too quickly and/or it deviates from the syllabus in a significant way. As I mention below, this does not mean that I will not add or subtract things from the syllabus depending on how the class is going, but only that I will not generally add or remove whole topics or fundamental content.

When it comes to the classroom itself, I expect students to come to class, to come prepared, and to pay attention. To get students to come to class and come prepared, I use pop quizzes. The quizzes always cover the material they were supposed to have prepared for that day, not material we have covered already, and students are told this at the outset. When presenting new material, I generally lecture about the material first and then talk about it second. In most classes, talking about the material entails generating “real world” examples. This approach has two advantages. First, particularly in classes where most students are reluctant to participate, it makes the students feel more confident about their grasp on the material. Confident students talk, unsure students do not. Second, it gives me the opportunity to gain a better understanding of their level of comprehension. Again, I believe the goal of any good course is that students can apply the concepts they are taught. If they cannot apply them, then they do not understand them. If the class is struggling to apply the concepts, using real world examples gives me the opportunity to re-teach something in a different way. If students do not understand something the first time, the only way to help

them is to repeat the topic and present it in a different manner. Simply repeating can help, but simple repetition is not nearly as successful as repeating and rephrasing. This is where flexibility is crucial.

In an ideal environment all students would freely participate in class. But, in most cases, students do not freely participate and do not respond well to prodding. I like to use a wide range of in class activities to force students to participate, without them fully realizing that they have been forced. One approach I like is to divide the class into small groups, give each group a different real world event, and ask them to analyze it in the context of what we have learned in class. This is not always successful, so I do not always do this. Another of my personal favorites, primarily in Microeconomics classes, are market simulation games. For example, using simple pit market auctions, students can see that when a market fulfills a certain set of assumptions, it behaves (almost) as the textbooks suggest. They can also see what happens when one of those assumptions is violated, as in monopoly, monopsony, or imperfect information. Doing exercises like this early in a semester has many beneficial externalities. These experiments require that the students talk to each other, but in a very non-threatening way. This helps facilitate the success of small group work later in the semester. Also, we can return to the same basic experiment over and over again, make small changes, run it again and see what happens. Finally, it is fun. And, for some reason, the sense of fun these activities generate seems to carry over into regular lectures.

Underlying all of these approaches remains the concept of flexibility. I am always prepared to add an activity if it worked well in the past, or subtract one if it did not. I am always prepared to explain something in a different way, approach it from a different point of view, or simply go over it again. I will rewrite homework assignments over the course of the semester if I feel that students need more practice in one thing and less in another. I will slow down or speed up the pace of the course as I see fit and the syllabus permits. I do not write the exams until just before I give them, to ensure that the exams reflect the way I ended up presenting the material, even though the content remains essentially unchanged. And, I am constantly updating the real world examples, so that (hopefully) the students are at least familiar with the events they are analyzing. I do all of this in order to accomplish the two goals I started with, that students know why the material is important, and that they are able to use it.

Summary of Teaching Evaluations

The teaching evaluations at the University of Massachusetts have far too many questions to cover in a succinct manner. Therefore, I selected four of the questions that I feel are most relevant. I report the mean response to this question for every class for which I was either the primary instructor or the teaching assistant (where I have separate evaluations from the primary instructor). Courses for which I was the primary instructor are labeled with an asterisk (*), for all other courses I was a teaching assistant.

The instructor was well prepared for class			
Course	Semester	Department	Rating
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2003	Economics	4.64, 4.43, 4.79
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Spring 2004	Economics	4.55, 4.80, 4.75, 4.89
Money and Banking	Fall 2004	Economics	4.21, 4.85
Contemporary American Economy	Spring 2005	Economics	4.57
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2005	Economics	4.43, 4.79
Introduction to Political Economy	Spring 2006	Economics	4.88, 4.69
Intermediate Microeconomics*	Summer 2006	Economics	4.67
Intermediate Microeconomics	Fall 2006	Economics	4.62
Intermediate Microeconomics*	Winter 2007	Economics	4.73
Contemporary Economics of Information Technology*	Spring 2007	Resource Econ.	4.64
Contemporary Economics of Information Technology*	Spring 2008	Resource Econ.	4.41

The instructor explained course material clearly

Course	Semester	Department	Rating
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2003	Economics	4.50, 4.33, 4.64
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Spring 2004	Economics	4.30, 4.87, 4.69, 5.00
Money and Banking	Fall 2004	Economics	4.00, 4.69
Contemporary American Economy	Spring 2005	Economics	4.71
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2005	Economics	4.78, 4.74
Introduction to Political Economy	Spring 2006	Economics	4.76, 4.81
Intermediate Microeconomics*	Summer 2006	Economics	4.27
Intermediate Microeconomics	Fall 2006	Economics	4.62
Intermediate Microeconomics*	Winter 2007	Economics	4.45
Contemporary Economics of Information Technology*	Spring 2007	Resource Econ.	4.57
Contemporary Economics of Information Technology*	Spring 2008	Resource Econ.	4.18

The instructor showed a personal interest in helping

Course	Semester	Department	Rating
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2003	Economics	4.50, 4.52, 4.64
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Spring 2004	Economics	4.50, 4.73, 4.56, 4.50
Money and Banking	Fall 2004	Economics	4.21, 4.46
Contemporary American Economy	Spring 2005	Economics	4.81
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2005	Economics	4.61, 4.53
Introduction to Political Economy	Spring 2006	Economics	4.47, 4.19
Intermediate Microeconomics*	Summer 2006	Economics	4.33
Intermediate Microeconomics	Fall 2006	Economics	4.31
Intermediate Microeconomics*	Winter 2007	Economics	4.27
Contemporary Economics of Information Technology*	Spring 2007	Resource Econ.	4.77
Contemporary Economics of Information Technology*	Spring 2008	Resource Econ.	4.00

Overall rating of instructor's teaching

Course	Semester	Department	Rating
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2003	Economics	4.57, 4.29, 4.64
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Spring 2004	Economics	4.25, 4.87, 4.67, 4.61
Money and Banking	Fall 2004	Economics	3.86, 4.46
Contemporary American Economy	Spring 2005	Economics	4.67
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2005	Economics	4.70, 4.74
Introduction to Political Economy	Spring 2006	Economics	4.82, 4.33
Intermediate Microeconomics*	Summer 2006	Economics	4.13
Intermediate Microeconomics	Fall 2006	Economics	4.46
Intermediate Microeconomics*	Winter 2007	Economics	4.45
Contemporary Economics of Information Technology*	Spring 2007	Resource Econ.	4.36
Contemporary Economics of Information Technology*	Spring 2008	Resource Econ.	4.09