

## STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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I owe most of my success as a teacher to a single factor: luck. I do not mean to imply that what success I have had is unwanted or undeserved, that I do not strive for excellence in my teaching or afford my teaching obligations the efforts they warrant. Instead I mean that I love teaching, that my “job” is one that I enjoy immensely, and that the effort expended in its pursuit is far more rewarding than exhausting. This is the fortuitous result of a coincidental intersection; it is the same things that initially drew me to the discipline—the desire to understand the philosophical and analytic connections between everyday life and scientific precision—that allow for my success as an instructor. For it is repetition—not simply reiteration, but a careful restating and reworking of similar problems in disparate but interconnected ways—that forms cornerstone of my teaching style. This focus on repetition, combined with an emphasis on student involvement in the direction and mechanics of the class through questions and discussions, form the basis of my teaching.

As an instructor in the social sciences, fostering critical thinking skills is the ultimate goal of my teaching. I firmly believe that a deep understanding of economic tools advances towards this end, but that this understanding is not sufficient to achieve the goal. In order to effectively use the paradigm of economic analysis one must understand not just an economist’s tools, but also the strengths and the limitations of those tools. As such I always strive to include a discussion of the distinction between the normative and positive considerations surrounding the economic topics covered in my courses. Illustrating that economics does not make “value judgments,” that efficiency and equity are not necessarily related in a positivistic sense, and that it may well be normative beliefs that should guide the positive analyses of economists, allows students not just to make stronger economic arguments, but to better understand the value and place for such arguments. By providing a more complete framework to analyze social problems, programs, and policies, economics can become an invaluable tool for my students well beyond the duration of our course.

While this may appear straightforward, it didn’t take long for me to realize that developing a teaching style consistent with achieving this goal is anything but. The first course I taught—an undergraduate game theory course—offered little in the way of pedagogical flexibility. Due to the nature and quantity of material I was charged with covering, “discussion” sections were forced to become GSI-led lectures. In this one-way teaching environment I quickly learned that repetition is vital to building a student’s understanding of economics. Unfortunately, I learned just as quickly that there is no faster way to lose the attention and focus of a class than redundancy. Striking this balance was even more delicate in a classroom environment that was composed of students who drew upon dramatically different backgrounds and employed drastically different approaches to understand the material. This is where I found myself lucky to be an instructor in such a diverse discipline.

As most every economic model has a conceptual root—a problem, situation, or idea that is easily observed in the “real world”—I try to build ideas starting with examples familiar to the students’ everyday lives. I then re-express that same idea graphically; a visual retelling of the story gives more analytically inclined students the reinforcement they needed. Finally, I bring forth the quantitative underpinnings of the analysis. This final repetition of the model helps the most mathematically inclined students to understand the material, and further reinforces the key points of the model for all students. By restating similar problems in disparate ways, and working through them with varying techniques, I am able to achieve repetition while avoiding monotony. Though it was developed specifically for a lecture environment, I have found this style of repetition to be an essential and invaluable component of my teaching philosophy for every manner of economics course.

While a lecture format was really the only option in my first teaching assignment, it became immediately apparent from blank stares and fluttering eyelids that something more was required to

capture the attention of my Econ 101 students. The solution I found stemmed from a simple question: why try to guess what thoughts and questions the students have when you can simply ask them? By using open and general questions to involve students in the direction of the class I found greater success than I could have anticipated. The students and I both gained a better understanding of the material, as well as a better understanding of their approach to it. By letting students be my guide, I learned new and useful ways to think about the models and concepts that I would have otherwise overlooked. This bolstered my ability to attack familiar problems in new and different ways, and kept the attention of the students far more effectively than simply lecturing.

The main problem I anticipated with soliciting and following student direction is that off-topic tangents or inaccurate responses would be common. However, I have learned that student direction, *especially* when “misguided,” affords a great opportunity to teach. This is in part due to the fact that while mistakes are prevalent in economics, they are rarely diverse. Everyone goes down the wrong path in economics at some point, but it is often the same wrong path we have all gone down. By following a student’s “mistake” I hope that I am better able to help all my students recognize the warning signs along that wayward path. I can recall myriad times in my own student career when I was able to dodge an incorrect answer by recognizing that I had made a common mistake—one I would have overlooked had I not been down that same erroneous path before. It is my hope that by embracing student “mistakes” and the opportunities they afford I help students to better recognize the paths that lead to pitfalls before they fall into them.

Another fortuitous result of the components of my teaching style is that they can help to foster a feeling of inclusion in the classroom. By emphasizing that economic efficiency or success does not constitute a hierarchy in terms of social or political ideals, the risk of alienating or upsetting students with different backgrounds and beliefs is minimized. Approaching economic material from myriad perspectives ensures that students with different skill sets and preparation levels are equally able to understand and apply the economic way of thinking. Utilizing student input and following even those thought processes that might be off-track ensures that all students can feel free to participate in and impact the class. By weaving normative discussions into the more positivistic framework of economics, highlighting numerous and disparate facets of economic tools, and eliciting student direction I have found that all students can and do more fully participate in their own learning processes, and utilize the tools and paradigms of economics to enhance their critical analysis skills.

While I believe I have found a formula for success in my teaching, I try at all costs to avoid a formulaic feel to my teaching. It is rare that I approach more than one problem from start to finish using the same concept-to-quant treatment. Instead I try to bounce back and forth within a discussion, emphasizing key ideas by illustrating the similarities and connections between the conceptual, analytic, and quantitative paradigms, and reinforcing these ideas with both questions and interjections. I seek to include encourage a more normative discussion when the positive results of a model too strongly suggest a particular view is “correct.” I challenge and encourage students to use their analytic thinking to direct, and not just apply economic tools. My ultimate goal is to create an environment where every student can be an active participant in achieving as deep of an understanding of the course material as he or she wants, and more importantly, one that fosters the students’ abilities to apply that understanding beyond the scope of the course. While I do not expect this goal can ever be fully achieved, my hope is that by striving for it I will be doing the best job that I can for each class. However, before I conclude, I should offer a confession: altruism is certainly not the predominant motivation behind the goals and methods of my instructional style. Leading a class towards these goals is truly a labor of love for me, one that I enjoy immensely, and that I hope to always be pursuing.