Teaching Philosophy

When I began my course of study, my goal was to get my PhD and work for private industry or the government. After teaching my first class during the summer after my first year in graduate school, my mind had not changed. However, something began to happen as I taught more and more classes. I became more comfortable in the front of the class and students began responding to me. There is very little more professionally satisfying to me then asking question and seeing ten hands go up in response. Or looking out at a classroom full of students after coming to a conclusion and seeing that “a-ha” moment in their faces.

My experience with principles courses as an undergraduate was underwhelming and certainly did not draw me to the major. I am very aware of how dry and abstract the subject can be. But that is part of the challenge and it can be very rewarding when students let me know how much they enjoyed the class, especially when they had little or no interest in economics before the course began.

I have also found that teaching can go hand in hand with my research, rather than simply take time away from it. A semester has rarely gone by without a new research idea or a new way of thinking about my current work popping into my head based on an unexpected question or a comment a student asks. The great thing about teaching economics to those who have never had it before or to non-majors is that they are looking at topics from different perspectives. I believe this gives me a more well-rounded view of some issues that economists sometimes take as given.

The methods I use in the classroom are at least partially dependent on the course I am teaching. I have taught three types of courses, each of which require slightly different techniques.

The first type is the traditional macro and micro principles course. For this course, my objective is really two-fold. First, to give students the basic tools necessary to think like an economist. To do this, I, as often as possible, go over examples at the beginning of class demonstrating concepts covered in the previous class. This keeps those concepts fresh in the students’ minds as we start new material and makes sometimes abstract material more concrete. I also like to ask questions and engage in a little back and forth about economic concepts to make sure that the material is sinking in.

Second, to help students learn to enjoy the study of economics and hopefully convert a few to the major. I do this by applying as much as I can to their lives. How a firm chooses to operate in monopolistic competition is largely unrelatable to college students until I start telling them about product variety and locational advantages in areas of the city or even the campus they know. I also have at least a few discussions on economic issues throughout the semester in order to get students engaged and thinking about real world applications to what we are doing in class.

The second type of course is introduction to the American economy which is basically an economics course with little math for people in non-technical majors. My goal for this course is to help students gain enough knowledge and experience thinking about government policies to allow them to intelligently critique what they hear from politicians and the media. In other words, help them to be responsible and engaged citizens. In this course, I go over basic economic principles like opportunity costs and supply and demand in order to give the students a method of critiquing various public policies. I introduce each topic by drawing a graph and going over the basic theory. Then I have a discussion with the class about the various advantages and disadvantages of the policy (examples include free trade, the legalization of marijuana, and deficit reduction strategies).

I employ two main types of assignments to achieve my goal. The first is a group presentation on an economic issue of the day. This does several things. For one, it forces the student to speak in front of the class. No matter what their major, public speaking is an invaluable tool to have. For another, it forces them to work with each other which is another skill that is often valued in the workplace. Lastly, they are forced to research and think about both sides of an issue they may not have intelligently considered before.

The second type of assignment are policy statements. I have my students choose an issue that we have discussed in class, research that issue, and write a 3 to 4 page paper for a policymaker arguing in favor of a particular position and backing up those arguments with academic studies and data. This assignment forces students away from I think and I believe statements towards the data shows statements.

The third type of courses I have taught are intermediate courses. I have taught intermediate micro and sports economics, but I would use similar methods and I am prepared to teach intermediate macro, labor economics, and econometrics. In these types of courses, students generally have an interest in the subject matter and have at least a base understanding of economics. This course is much more heavily focused on lecturing since the main focus is on economic theory.

One of the most difficult things I have found about teaching is how to measure how effective a teacher I am. Teaching evaluations certainly help with this. I always read the comments students write in my evaluations and I try to incorporate the advice that I am given as much as I can. For instance, one semester several students commented that I was lecturing too much and they would prefer to have more discussions. For the next semester, I made sure that I built in significantly more discussions on some interesting topics such as the importance, or lack thereof, of deficits, a market for kidneys, and how to get ourselves out of our current slow recovery.

During a semester, homework and exams can tell me if I am teaching effectively, but this can be noisy because it could be that my teaching is effective, but my tests are too hard. In general, I have found that asking students to give examples of their own demonstrates to me that they truly understand the concept. If examples are not appropriate, I ask questions of the class to make sure they are engaging with the topics. If these methods are inappropriate or just don’t work, then I poll the class. I ask how many people in the class could do well on a pop quiz without any notes, how many people could do well on a pop quiz with notes, and how many people could do well if I allowed them to bring a quiz home to turn in the next class. Once I tell them that they will not actually be getting a quiz, they tend to be comfortable telling me the truth. Based on the results of the poll, I either offer further explanations or I move on with new material.