Teaching Philosophy

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Humans are curious beings. My years as an active scholar and passionate educator have shown me that researchers are not the only people who love to question and explore; a student with a curious mind can initiate extraordinary learning. Consequently, my teaching philosophy centers around four principles that tap into students’ curiosity and facilitate their “learning-as-exploration.” **First,** experimentation in the classroom is “science as play.” It creates a friendly environment that allows students to verify or challenge textbook wisdom in both a fun and realistic way. **Second,** trial and error learning is inherent. **Third,** feedback is golden. This goes both ways: my students receive frequent performance reports from a timely “referee,” and I solicit suggestions from my students and peers. **Fourth,** scientific reasoning precedes the conception of insights. While the value of memorizing formulas and facts is not to be underplayed, those who master the logic of economics are better prepared to tackle unfamiliar problems.

I further illustrate how each of these points informs my teaching below.

1. **Engage today’s students with technology and classroom games.** When my 84-year-old grandmother in China started to message me on her iPad, I realized that technology would wrap its arms around me whether I like it or not. Most of today’s students grew up using computers, and more recently, graphic-rich and user-friendly smartphones and tablets. Should I resist this trend and compete against all these devices with my chalkboard examples? How can I work with, rather than against these tools?

Modern pedagogies, such as classroom games and Internet content, engage students in a lively classroom experience. I find playing a YouTube clip before each class a good way to jump-start a discussion. As students walk into the classroom, the flashing screen and music melody of the Beatles’ “Taxman” draw their attention away from their devices to my “device”. As I pause the video, I pose a few questions to the class: “What is the implied tax rate in the song? What type of taxation is mentioned here? Are there other forms of tax you can think of?” Having won the attention of my students immediately, I can proceed from there with a receptive audience.

Classroom experiments are an “Archimedes’ mirror” in this battle for attention. Vernon Smith’s double oral auction often ignites the class with a great excitement of bids and asks. This lends intuition and authenticity to the discussion of supply and demand. Double oral auctions, of course, are just the beginning—students experience Bertrand competition, the welfare-enhancing effect of voluntary trade, and the tragedy of the commons, rather than just reading about them. Many great teachers have shared their game designs online and many companies (like moblab.com and Socrative.com) have come up with a web tool that easily implements classroom games. Why not have fun and be as tech-savvy as our students?

2. **Mistakes are milestones of learning.** A society that glorifies the success story does not show the reality of learning: many failures precede the moment of victory. Students often prefer instantaneous conclusions and are eager for me to provide them. This preference manifests differently among students, be it the fear of being wrong or the instant gratification of “the right
answer.” Supporting this attitude weakens the crucial reasoning processes.

I use a variety of strategies to encourage students to change their mentality and embrace mistakes constructively. In my principles class, I offer regular quizzes with an infinite number of trials, assuring that errors will be investigated, and we will advance from them together. Because they can try repeatedly, the quizzes encourage students to read and reread the textbook to clarify areas of prior confusion. I offer six midterms and a final exam in one semester, which mitigates the impact of a single score and highlights key areas where one may need improvement.

I apply the same measures to my own teaching. I regularly test new teaching tools in class; from interactive teaching apps for smartphones to online gaming systems. Any tool that proved ineffective, I discontinued. Others have become standards that work wonders. Through my own trial and error process, I have witnessed steady improvement on my teaching evaluations. Those mistakes are milestones of my own learning.

3. Frequent feedback is gold. When I was a student, final exams were a lot of stress. One important reason was the uncertainty of my standing up to that point; the only previous feedback was a midterm two months passed. I do not believe that students hate exams per se. Instead, they dislike uncertainty. This is yet another reason I design my principles class to contain six midterms, each of which is promptly scored and returned. Providing feedback on one’s learning outcome every two weeks boosts confidence for a student’s strengths and creates awareness of problem areas.

Office hours are yet another important piece in the feedback loop. More often than not, though, the students who need the most help are not motivated enough to utilize the office hours. How do I deliver personalized help to those in need? I assign a small amount of extra credit for seeking help. Doing this prevents students from being apprehensive when asking for help, and I have found more students showing up to receive this timely feedback from me.

Naturally, I also benefit from prompt feedback. Through a voluntary midterm review, I create a space for dialogue with my students and am therefore able to adjust the content and speed of the class to suit different needs and tastes. With the feedback system described above, my students and I can both break the ice of self-deception and be honest about what we do not know.

4. Emphasize scientific reasoning to train future economists and beyond. High impact economic teaching stimulates people to fundamentally change their perspectives on their own lives and social issues in the world. In principle classes, I aspire to train my students to apply their knowledge to real-world problems and effectively communicate social predicaments to their peers from an economic standpoint. A firm handle on economic reasoning gives them the ability to speak on a variety of topics with little reference to a textbook.

I also teach the senior capstone class; this is where economics majors hone their scientific reasoning. The real world is full of open-ended questions with no fixed equation to plug numbers into. Step by step, the students formulate a research question, review the literature, construct applicable economic models, select data, and apply an appropriate empirical strategy to test their hypotheses. I convey the idea that it is the rigorous reasoning process, and not the conclusion, that is the most important final product of good research.

I will sum up with this quote by William Butler Yeats: “Education is not the filling of a pail, but
the lighting of a fire.” I look forward to spreading the idea of learning through experimentation and I am certain that my passion will continue to kindle my students’ inner fire of learning in the future.