

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Learning happens best with students who want to learn. No matter the subject, the educator must motivate interest. Active engagement is the best way to get students interested. My role as an educator then is to induce student engagement by, for example, running classroom experiments, encouraging discussion, and relating the material to current events, political controversy, and everyday life.

Engagement takes place within a framework of clear expectations and learning objectives. I believe that students can take control of their learning and see their progress as a series of accomplishments, but only if I fulfill my role as a guide by mapping out the way.

My role as an economist in the classroom is to introduce students to the scope and wonder of human interaction, to help them explore how our simple, everyday decisions and behaviors affect billions of other humans all over the world. To consider how a species went from being a few million nomadic hunter-gatherers to billions of highly connected specialists, cooperating with people we will never meet, enjoying goods we could never hope to make and making use of knowledge we could never hope to know - all without being aware it is even happening. In short, the role of the economist is to teach people how their everyday lives are extraordinary, from the most complicated interactions of political economy, to the simple fact that every time they go to the supermarket there is milk ready and waiting. We affect innumerable others, and innumerable others affect us.

However, we have to economize on our time and topics. I start the plan for any course by deciding what are the most important concepts to learn, what are the most useful to really understanding the topic at hand, and so what the goals for that course are. I then plan backwards from those goals, devising a production plan of sorts. Yet, I have found it is important to avoid *over*-planning. Overly ambitious goals can lead to rushing through topics just to get them out of the way, or missing the goals themselves. This was a problem I struggled with in my early teaching experiences, mismatching my speed in covering material and student ability to take it in. I learned to space out content, and allow more time for side bars and questions of application. I've learned how to build into the class schedule a degree of flexibility, so that we can give extra time as needed for letting the material "soak in" and for unplanned discussions to flower.

Unplanned discussions prompted by student questions are a huge asset. The student who wants to learn learns best, and the best way to engage that desire to learn is to help students untangle questions they have about the material and about the world. Economics classes can often spin into dry mathematical models of mechanical worlds, but great economics classes can instead pull back the curtains of the world and show how ideas are connected. When students learn a new concept and immediately have that "Aha!" moment when some process of the world snaps sharply into focus, that is a concept that will be with that student forever. Impromptu discussions and varying examples can help that, but another tool I find useful is planned experiments during class. Vernon Smith-style market experiments, among others, turn passive students into engaged actors in the classroom, learning through firsthand experience.

I have also found that one of the best ways to engage students is simple honesty. Economics is an inherently political topic and George Mason University is one of the most diverse schools in the U.S., and so discussions must engage students with diverse ideologies and knowledge of political economy, in addition to great diversity in ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds. I find frank and open discussion of the disagreements within the field, and of where judgments and beliefs conflict with economic theory engage students to really examine their beliefs. Students become more engaged and sympathetic when I discuss my own beliefs and

ideologies openly, and discuss where reasonable people may disagree on economic issues, and where the economic consensus is pretty clearly on one side.

I assign homework and design tests based on the stated goals of the course. A student who keeps up on his/her homework has created an excellent study guide when exam time rolls around. Such a program incentivizes students to be diligent in their work, because taking responsibility for their work will pay off in easier studying later. It also helps create an atmosphere of trust between myself and the students. Students know that any homework I assign is on topics they need to know, and so are much more willing to engage challenging material and questions. I respect their time and needs outside of the class, and they in turn trust that doing the work is in their best interests.

This environment of trust extends outside the classroom as well. Students often come to me for advice on job search, help with writing skills, or dealing with uncertainty about their major and other life decisions. Students believe that I want to help them and they ask for help. Sometimes it is help with classwork they just don't get, or algebra they wish they had learned. I am proud of every student review and evaluation that says I care about students. I strive to improve the environment of openness and caring, allowing students to feel comfortable asking big questions in class and in office hours, or even just "How is that possibly true?"

I love economics, and I love teaching others to apply the economic way of thinking to all manner of problems. I bring that love and energy to the classroom, and hope to inspire it in my students as they work to learn not only how markets work, but just how complex and fascinating human society is. I make a point of applying economic analysis to non-market exchange, not only in the realm of political economy, but also basic human interactions. Student responses and emails to me have highlighted just how much light a seemingly simple example can shed on a complicated topic. Seemingly out of place puzzles keep the class interesting.

I believe that consistently applying the principles of engagement, structure, respect and openness has improved my ability to connect with my students and instill a love and excitement for learning. I see this borne out in my teaching evaluations which start off OK and have improved over my career. More importantly, I see it in the responses of students who decide to become economics majors and minors after taking my classes, and who go on to graduate work and seek me out for recommendations letters and advice. For me, seeing students share my love of economics and of making learning a priority is the best sign of success as a teacher.