

During my first year of college, I took an introductory microeconomics course. The framework economics provided to understand world events was intriguing. However, the course itself was not terribly interesting. It was all black and white graphs, “good x,” and “good y.” The ubiquitous widget didn’t even make an appearance for a change of pace. Because the underlying ideas interested me, I asked my advisor to recommend a more applied economics class for the following semester. He suggested a comparative economics system class and told me to talk to the professor about the class. I said I would. “No, no,” he said, “Go now. His office is next door. Just knock. He’ll tell you all about the class.”

Being a freshman who was still slightly intimidated by economics professors, I hesitantly made my way to the next office and tentatively knocked on the door. The professor ushered me into his office, and we spent the next hour and a half discussing his class. I left amazed by the power of mathematical economic models to explain social and political events, both contemporary and historical.

When I teach and work with students, I try to instill the same sense of excitement about economics. During my first semester of teaching, I made of the mistake of stating to my students, “This is really exciting,” and then proceeded to lecture them about shifting curves. I sensed the lack of energy in the room, and sought the advice a more experienced instructor. “Don’t tell, show,” she advised. Instead of presenting economics as a set of shifting lines or memorized facts, I began to emphasize economics as a set of tools that can be used to analyze and understand society. I encouraged discussion about events—however trivial—that demonstrated the economics of everyday life. When first presenting supply and demand, for example, I might start class by asking the students how much a ticket to the last Michigan football game, and then ask the price for tickets to the upcoming Michigan-Ohio State game. I would frame the discussion of ticket prices around the supply and demand model. Throughout the course of the semester, as students become more comfortable with economic models, I would transition discussion to issues of a more far-reaching nature, such as minimum wage laws.

Besides teaching introductory economics, I have been the graduate student instructor for several upper level economics classes that fulfill an undergraduate writing requirement. These classes are smaller than the typical economics class and require several writing assignments throughout the semester. I met individually with each student on a regular basis to improve both their writing and economic reasoning skills. During these classes, I realized how small class sizes can facilitate the intellectual development of students. One student, in particular, emphasized this. Her first writing assignment was a mix of improperly framed arguments and poor grammar. When I met with her to discuss it, she told me that she had attended what was widely acknowledged to be one of the worst schools in the state. By taking large lecture classes with multiple choice exams, she had made it to her junior year of college without knowing how to identify the subject of a sentence or explain the effect of a price ceiling. She wanted to change that. We met every week throughout the semester, and I provided her with additional assignments to develop her writing skills and improve her knowledge of economics. Watching her improvement was inspiring, and her last paper rightfully earned her one of the highest grades in the class.

For the past year and half, I have had a handful of students working with me as research assistants. This year, I also have several students who are working with me as part of a university program to teach research methods to undergraduates. Instead of simply assigning them tasks, I instead explain the goals of a project, and we together develop a strategy to achieve the goals. Not only does this practice allow students to develop research skills, but I have also noticed that students who take part in planning the research project become more invested and perform higher quality work.

When working with my research assistants or teaching students, I try to instill a sense of excitement about the powerful framework economics provides. I do this by guiding students in discovering the connections between the economic models we study in class and society—both today and in the past.