Teaching Philosophy

As a student, I always thought that good professors were those “who had it”, those who possessed charisma and eloquence. It wasn’t until I began teaching when I realized the amount of work that goes into leading a good class. Giving an entertaining lecture is nice, but a good teacher does more than that.

For the last three years, I have been the Economics Department Graduate Student Mentor. My responsibility is to train first-time instructors and act as a teaching coach throughout the course of the semester. This position has brought me to invest a lot of energy to try and understand what makes an effective economics teacher. I’ve interacted with the University Center for Research on Learning and Teaching and with faculty members with outstanding teaching reputations. I have conducted over forty class observations of first time instructors and had many discussions with students about what they like and dislike about their instructors. As a resource person I have had to think about numerous aspects of a teacher’s responsibilities. I have helped instructors deal with language barriers and advised instructors who felt that their students did not respect their authority. In the following, I discuss some of the things I have learned from this amazing opportunity and from my personal experience.

First and foremost, when I teach I try to keep in mind what it feels like to be a student. Different students have different motivations. Undergraduates, for example, do not all share my passion for economics. Luckily, I have a research topic that I can discuss fairly easily: one of the question I ask in my research is “Does money buy happiness?”.

All students are concerned with grades; they will not be receptive to philosophical discussions unless they feel comfortable with the concepts at hand. I always try to complement abstract explanations with step-by-step reliable problem solving methods. Effective teaching requires the ability to teach to the entire class, be it an engineering student, familiar with optimization techniques, or a communications major, for whom Principles of Economics is a dreadful requirement.

In my experience students appreciate structure. A professor cannot expect his students to be “on board” if he is not organized. It is because I prepare thoroughly that I feel comfortable discussing tangential topics and adjusting to the students’ pace. If I use a syllabus, I make sure it is detailed, exhaustive and prepared before the first class. I find that although administrative details cannot help me conduct a good class, they can get in the way of it.
One of the main challenges I face when teaching is gauging the students’ understanding. Students will nod to what professors say. It does not necessarily mean they are following, but rather that they are polite. It is easier to notice a student who is bored than a student who is lost. Students who can not keep up with the material are always the most quiet. Three things help me monitor the students’ understanding. First, I ask specific questions. I avoid questions such as “Does everyone get this?” and prefer questions like “How does the answer change if I multiply the fixed cost by two?” I also try to establish contact with the students. I try to arrive early to class so I have time to chat with them. When students feel comfortable, they are more likely to ask for help. Finally, I do everything I can to encourage class participation.

Getting students to participate is one of the main challenges for every professor. The best advice ever given to me was “wait”. First time instructors have the bad habit of answering their own questions to avoid the uncomfortable silence that follows. Once the students begin to expect this pattern, they make no effort to answer questions posed to the class. During the first class of every semester, I make a point of asking an open-ended question such as “What is an economy?” I then wait until several students have responded. The wait is typically a bit awkward but it helps implement the right class dynamic. I also often ask students to vote on the answer they prefer by way of in-class surveys. These type of questions are less intimidating and get the students involved.

Something else I have found to be important to establish at the beginning of a semester is a perception amongst the students that I care about their success and am there to help them. I make very explicit what they should expect from me and what I expect from them. I tell students as precisely as I can what they will need to do and the level of effort they will have to exert in order to get a good grade. For example, I tell them that being able to follow what I do during discussion is not enough and that they must make sure that they can solve problems on their own. I find that managing expectation helps to create a class atmosphere that is conducive to learning.

Being a professor is a unique opportunity to have an impact on society. Every time I have asked my students “Why does the government impose taxes?”, I have obtained at most one answer from the class. As disconcerting as this might be coming from future tax payers, the question always leads to a fascinating discussion among the students, which is what I strive for in teaching. If I can get the students to think more critically about the things they hear on the news or read in the newspaper they are learning. Every semester, I look forward to the first day of class. The positive energy I get from teaching has given me the motivation to navigate the challenges of my Doctorate studies.