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Teaching Statement

I believe that critical thought is essential for autonomy, and that autonomy is the end goal of any education. My goal as an educator is that students go beyond learning the course material. I strive to give them the conditions to reconstruct, justify, criticize, and adapt what was taught in class when the situation demands it.

This philosophy guides how I teach. Consider, for example, a course in Introductory Microeconomics. In my experience as both instructor and TA, many students come to this course after a high school experience where memorization is heavily emphasized. They expect to learn a set of formulas and step-by-step methods to solve narrowly defined problems.

I start the course by setting different expectations. I emphasize how understanding the assumptions made by every economic model and how they are logically connected to its conclusions are essential to truly understand the model, and to use it well in real-world context.

When teaching, for example, supply curves, I bring attention to the fact that they reflect the choices of firms under a particular economic environment. Firms are modeled as rational actors who do their best to maximize profits, taking prices as given. I go from the general to the specific, putting the students in the shoes of firm owners who decide whether to increase production or enter the market. Higher costs or entry restrictions will make them want to offer fewer units to the market, for any given price. This is a particular case of a shift in the supply curve. The students do not need to memorize everything that could shift this curve. Instead, they can focus on understanding market participants objectives and limitations. The rest follows.

The learning of first principles, examples, and specific applications can, and should, go hand in hand. In my experience, starting the lesson with a very specific problem can help students to engage with the class and understand why they should engage with the day's topic. The problem can usually be followed by a brief guided discussion where students share their personal experiences, priors, and proposals.

As the discussion progresses, I present some general ideas that connect the situation at hand with a larger class of problems. This is the moment to enunciate general assumptions and follow them to their logical conclusions. I follow with the application of the theoretical results to other examples, reinforcing the prior learning. The class can then end with a joint search for counterexamples and situations where the theory applies only partially, or not at all. This is another opportunity to revisit assumptions and logical steps.

These discussions can also help to assess the students' understanding. The questions and opinions shared by them at this point are a reflection of their learning, and provide valuable input on how to pace the course. In classes where students come from very diverse backgrounds (as is the rule at UBC) this can help highlight what experiences are shared or not, what examples work, and direct the focus to issues that connect the course topics with a diverse student audience.

Switching back-and-forth between the general and the specific can be time-consuming, but is also very flexible. The order and time used for each approach can be adapted to match the topic, the class, and the available time.

As the course progresses, I emphasize how new content is either analogous, derivative or, sometimes, opposed to old content to help students achieve a better understanding. Knowing the justification of a theory and how far it can be taken helps to engage with this theory on a deeper level than memorizing would ever allow. What is well understood generally is also remembered longer. The longer students remember what they have learned, the more opportunities they will have to actually use it.

Besides being the instructor of Introductory Microeconomics, I also have extensive experience as a teaching assistant in other courses. I have been a TA for Intermediate Microeconomics, Environmental Economics, Introduction to Econometrics, Advanced Econometrics, and graduate level Microeconomics. Each course is unique, and each class is unique. Naturally, every case required some adaptations. Nonetheless, I could apply the general principles of the outlined methodology with slight variations and good results.

As I acquire experience and incorporate student feedback, I will continue to improve on this method. The objective, however, will stay the same: nurture student autonomy.