Teaching Philosophy

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For the first assignment in the writing class that I taught at Johns Hopkins, I asked the students to write an essay analyzing the flaws in an anti-NAFTA text. Tom R.'s first draft was little more than an unsubstantiated claim that the anti-NAFTA text was mistaken because everyone knows that free trade is good. Five semesters later, in the spring of 2010, Eli P. expressed the opposite views. He often stopped me after class trying to argue that international trade has negative consequences and is, overall, bad. The one wrote a draft that was little more than an unsupported pro-trade polemic; the other largely echoed anti-globalization rhetoric. Both students were engaged and passionate but needed to combine these attributes with a greater knowledge of economics.

These anecdotes illustrate my primary objectives as an economics teacher: providing students with an understanding of economic subjects and training them to think analytically and critically about these subjects. I take a three-pronged approach, using the formal mathematical, geometric, and verbal representations of a topic. Instruction along three vectors gives students multiple lines of attack when trying to understand a theory, model, or application. This has two main advantages. First, students can initially choose the path of least resistance to approach a topic. Second, after grasping the basics, students gain further insights by studying a topic from different angles.

For example, in War and Peace in International Trade, a course I developed for the spring 2010 semester, I covered topics from customs unions to the political economy of trade. In each case, I used formal mathematics to introduce the question under investigation; graphs to demonstrate the workings of the model; and language to explain intuition and policy relevance. In addition to presenting economics along three vectors, I also ask students to work with each of them. In Elements of Microeconomics, the problem sets required solving equations, manipulating graphs, and writing a short response relating a current event to an economic concept, such as opportunity cost or comparative advantage.

Class instruction and assignments are also designed around a second teaching objective: fostering analytical and critical thinking. Students hone these skills by applying the material they have learned to new problems and different contexts. Problem sets, exams, and in-class exercises are all designed with this in mind. For example, the final assignment in the trade course was a case study analyzing a trade agreement, negotiation, or conflict in the context of a theoretical model. In order to apply a model to her chosen case study, a student first had to grasp the model from all three perspectives. Given the facts of her topics, she also had to evaluate the applicability of a model and then draw insights and conclusions about the case. Furthermore, she had to think critically about which aspects of the case study the model might not adequately explain. As with the writing responses in microeconomics, this final paper had the added benefit of applying abstract concepts to the real world that students observe, encouraging comprehension instead of memorization.

This final assignment was a challenge for many students. As a teacher, I recognize that students can meet high expectations only with guidance and assistance. This goes beyond encouraging questions. It is equally important to listen closely to the questions in order to identify the source of confusion. It also requires making expectations clear by providing concrete instructions and examples. Therefore rather than simply assigning a 12-page paper, I provided detailed directions with examples of appropriate topics, relevant questions, and available resources. To ensure that students were headed in the right direction, each student wrote a proposal. I met with students in groups to discuss their proposals and provide feedback on feasibility, direction, and additional resources. In class, I also demonstrated the type of thinking and analysis that I expected students to exhibit in their papers. For example, based on readings about a particular case study such as

the WTO shrimp-turtle dispute, I guided the class in deciding which of the models might apply to this case, deriving insights, and identifying limitations.

I took a similar approach when teaching expository writing, giving clear instructions and demonstrating the skills I expected students to apply in their writing. With each assignment, I distributed a list of the specific writing skills and elements that students needed to demonstrate in the essay in order to earn an A, B, or C grade. As preparation for writing the essay, the students first completed various short writing assignments and received feedback on each of them. Each essay focused on a different type of analysis that was modeled for the students in readings and class discussions. By setting clear expectations and guidelines, providing regular feedback, and demonstrating the analytical approach, I provided a structure that fostered the students' analytical thinking and writing skills. Indeed, I found that the practice of writing was so effective in honing students' analytical thinking abilities that I try to include writing elements in economics classes as well.

Whether providing writing instruction, teaching an economics class, or advising students on research, two objectives guide my teaching method: using multiple approaches to understand an idea and then utilizing this idea to exercise critical thinking. And in at least two specific cases, this approach has been effective. Tom R.'s final draft of his essay analyzing the anti-NAFTA text was much improved, displaying nuanced reasoning based on sound evidence from the text. Eli P. eventually understood that trade can have both positive and negative consequences, and that each of these opposing impacts finds support in theoretical models and data.