More than anything else, my teaching experiences have taught me to be aware of my students' interests and understanding. Early on, I was focused on so many other things that I sometimes lost track. I wanted to show students how I think about economics when I do research. For example, I wanted them to grasp how consumer surplus ignores differences in marginal utilities, or how blurry the difference between positive and normative can be, even if you are careful about the distinction. As I have gained experience, though, I have realized that the first things that I have to do is to show them that economics is important, and prove to them that they can do economics.

At first, I think that I was very focused on giving students overviews of literatures in economics. Even in introductory classes, I did that so much that, in some cases, it probably felt overwhelming. In introductory microeconomics, for example, I gave an overview of debates about international trade, starting with Ricardo. I talked about Ricardo's example of England and Portugal producing wine and cloth with different technologies. I showed how Portugal had an absolute advantage in both goods, but England has a comparative advantage in producing cloth. I showed how each country would be better off if it produced according to its comparative advantage and trading for the other good. I asked students, though, whether different places really had different technologies. I suggested that maybe the difference was in other things, like in the availability of capital. To model that, I introduced the basics of the Heckscher–Ohlin model, where countries have different factor allocations. Again, I asked students what the model lacked. I mentioned how most trade was between rich countries, where both technologies and factors should be quite similar.

After some reflection, I have realized that I need to provide support for students to understand why a topic is interesting, and some help to work through introductory problems, before I go too deeply into a literature. Over time, I have tended to work through more problems for students, and I also focus on more conventional topics. For example, I decided to devote more time to defining what a comparative advantage is within the simple Ricardian model. This involves being very specific about opportunity cost, and I make sure to be careful in going through all of the relevant figures. This signals to students that these concepts are important, and that they should know them. I also point out more of the benefits of a particular result, and how it makes sense. For example, comparative advantage is an important concept to consider in allocating group assignments – at least when everyone contributes. This gives students both a better understanding of the basic Ricardian result, and also a way of going beyond it.

Since my early classes, I have also started to use other technologies to check in with students. The most successful approach that I have found is using google forms to enable students to comment on the readings before each class. This gives them the opportunity to flag difficult parts, vent some of their frustrations, and also allows me to step in to clarify things if I need to. I think it also gives students an easy, low stress way of being heard.

I have continued to use group discussions and activities to get more information about my students. Discussions keep students engaged, allow them to express opinions, and give me a way of knowing whether, and how, my students are interacting with the ideas. I have learned that it is very useful to know what your students know, and why they may be confused. Also, it is good to know when students are not engaged with particular concepts. It is hard to make sure that students are doing the work, but I can do things like make the readings clear, emphasize them in class, and signal to students that understanding the readings will be a part of doing well in the class.

On factor that I often will uncover, though it often is hidden, is students' lack of prerequisites. For example, early on, I thought of math as a something that was better learned in other classes, since that was my experience. Now, I can understand, much better, how math can intimidate many of my students, including some of the most thoughtful. In my classes now, I try to be careful about spelling out what students should know about problem solving and derivations. I also think that it can make sense to give students a crash course, if we plan to use certain types of mathematics in the course.

Today, I still think that my goal is to encourage my students to think critically about economics. However, I think that I have a much better grasp of prerequisites for that in my own teaching. I need to know exactly what I want to get across, and to set bounds on how much can come across in a given period of time. I also am beginning to accept that, at least for a while, it is useful to simplify debates. I also am getting better at going through more technical parts of lecture, since I can see their value much more clearly.