

My teaching experiences have taught me to focus on why my students want to learn economics and how they understand class material. When I first started teaching, I sought to instill in my students a more critical, theoretical understanding of economics. For example, I developed lessons with the intent of showing how consumer surplus ignores differences in marginal utilities and 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 learned that the first things I have to do as a teacher are to convince students that economics is important and to show them that they are capable of doing economics.

Since I first started teaching, I have learned the importance of scaffolding. For example, I introduced international trade as a series of topics that built off each other. First, I used Ricardo's example of England and Portugal producing wine and cloth with different technologies. Ricardo's example highlights absolute and comparative advantages. It shows how each country can be better off if it produces according to its comparative advantage and trades for the other good. Next, I asked students as to whether different places really had different technologies; for example, I suggested that perhaps the difference was in other things, such as 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.

The most important thing that I have learned from teaching in a large research university is that before students can engage in more complex economic thinking, they need support in terms of understanding why certain topics within economics are relevant and interesting as well as some examples of introductory problems. From my experience teaching in various settings at the University of Michigan, I have become more skilled at challenging students who are more engaged without losing the students who have less experience and are perhaps less invested from the start in the discipline. I do this by working through more problems with students and focusing on more conventional topics that are directly related to their lives. I also structure my lessons so that they build from more basic to more complicated ideas. For example, when I had the opportunity later on to once again teach the concept of comparative advantage, I first devoted a significant amount of 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, which signals to students that these concepts are important and that they should be aware of them to be successful in the class. I also use real life examples to highlight 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. Such an example gives students

both a better understanding of the basic Ricardian result and also a way of engaging with the model in a more meaningful way.

In all of my classes, I recognize the value of using different technologies to check in with students and enhance their learning. The most successful approach that I have found is using Google forms to enable students to comment on assigned readings before each class. This gives them the opportunity to flag difficult parts, vent some of their frustrations, and it allows me to step in to clarify things if I need to and to incorporate their concerns into my teaching. 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 class concepts. I have learned that it is essential to know what your students know and why they may be confused. Also, it is important to have an early sense of when students are not engaged with particular concepts. It is always a challenge to make sure that students are engaging meaningfully with class assignments, but I counter this challenge by making readings clear, emphasizing them in class, and signaling to students that an understanding of the readings will be a part of doing well in the class.

Related to my commitment to scaffolding in my classes, it often takes time to discover that students are lacking the prerequisites they need to succeed in economics classes. I make sure to consider in all of my lessons that math can be intimidating to many students, including students who are thoughtful and who are otherwise quite engaged with class concepts. I do this by making it very explicit from the start exactly what students should know about problem solving and derivations. I have also considered the possibility of giving students a crash course in mathematics if we plan on using certain types of mathematics in the course that many students may not have been yet exposed to.

My goal as a teacher is to encourage my students to think critically about economics. In order to lead students to a higher level of critical interpretation, however, I have to have a solid sense myself of what exactly I want and need my students to learn and what can be accomplished in a given amount of time. I am also aware now that in order for students to leave my class with a deeper understanding of economics, debates should be structured in such a way to lead students from basic ideas to more complex applications of those ideas, which keeps all students engaged. Now, I begin with a basic explanation of the Ricardian model, followed by a simple application of it—perhaps the example of group allocation—before advancing to the abstract concept of comparative advantage. I am committed to leading students through the process of understanding why economics is important, how it applies directly to their lives, and how it shapes the world around them.