

Teaching Philosophy

When I first started teaching, I received the excellent advice to “be student-centric, not instructor-centric”. Inexperienced teachers tend to think about themselves – how do I sound? Am I teaching the material well? Am I interesting? – as opposed to thinking about the students – what are the students hearing? What are they comprehending and struggling with? What do they find interesting? I have had the privilege of teaching three courses at Michigan State University, and I have consistently tried to put this student-centric approach into practice. This approach helps students see how they can apply the material outside the classroom, recognize the value of diversity in economics, and learn the material at a higher level.

My student-centric approach to teaching begins immediately when the semester starts. I ask each student their personal and professional interests, and I think about ways to incorporate their interests into the course material. For example, I had multiple students in my Economics of Education class express an interest in learning more about the schooling systems in other countries, so I organized a panel of graduate students from Mexico, Italy, and Korea to speak to the class about their experiences. I also weave economics publications into the class that have clear real-world applications so students see how they might use the theories and models to answer important questions. Furthermore, I intentionally highlight the work of economists from underrepresented groups so every student can see someone like themselves participating in the economics profession. These actions increase student engagement and help students learn how they can apply the material to their lives beyond the class.

Another way I embrace a student-centric approach to teaching is by providing multiple opportunities and channels for students to share their opinions on the course structure and course content. Shortly after the semester starts, I ask students for anonymous feedback on the class, and then I adjust the remainder of the semester to incorporate their feedback. This short activity allows me to make small tweaks to the course delivery that improve the student experience. In addition, I dedicate a significant portion of my lectures asking students questions and facilitating discussion among students. This allows me to quickly diagnose how well students understand the material and identify what I need to spend more time teaching. It also gives students an opportunity to reflect on economic theories, modeling assumptions, and empirical results and share with other students how their past experiences shape their interpretation of the material. Not only does this benefit the student who participates, it demonstrates to the entire class the importance of considering diverse backgrounds and worldviews when communicating with others.

The final way I bring a student-centric approach to my teaching is by designing problem sets and exams that further student learning in addition to assessing it. I assign problem sets weekly which reinforce the course material through repetition and guides students through more difficult concepts. For example, one of the problem sets of my Economics of Education class helps students calculate state foundation grants and power equalization grants for schools. After working through the derivations themselves, students experience first-hand how these grant schemes create different property tax incentives for localities. When it comes to exams, I want students to spend their time studying the important concepts instead of guessing (incorrectly), so I provide students a full practice mid-term and final exam and devote class time to reviewing the answers. By setting clear expectations and reinforcing the material through repetition, students better learn the material, and the assessments are more accurate signals of their comprehension.

A student-centric approach to teaching improves student learning and the student experience overall. It helps students see how they can apply the material outside of the classroom. It promotes diversity by highlighting individual student voices and challenging students to consider issues through the lens of backgrounds different than their own. Finally, it signals the instructor’s commitment to student success. As two students wrote in my first course evaluation, “He helped me in this course better than any gen ed professor I’ve ever had” and “You can tell he cares”.