

Teaching Philosophy

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Teaching is my passion. I enjoy working directly with students both in and out of the classroom. At the core of my teaching philosophy is my principal goal, which is to foster careful, independent and critical thinking among each and every member of my classroom community. I consider the natural curiosity that we are all born with to be the primary engine of learning. During the learning process, I let curiosity lead the way, and I view myself primarily as a facilitator of learning, rather than a lecturer who simply delivers information from a textbook to my students. There are four themes by which I translate these beliefs into action: **Engagement, Empowerment, Enrichment, and Respect.**

Engagement is the key to unlocking a genuine desire to learn. I consider the specific meaning of engagement as the active interactions between learners. Albert Camus once wrote that “Some people talk in their sleep. Lecturers talk while other people sleep.” I believe it is a bad idea to be the only person who is “lecturing” in the classroom. All students should have the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas with others. Therefore, my courses are designed as discussion-oriented instruction. For instance, when we cover the topic of monopolization and its implications, I usually start by introducing the students to the Microsoft antitrust case (1997-2001). Students then naturally split into two sides: those who support Microsoft and those who don’t. In order to persuade others to their side, students look into the case carefully and become more curious about the reasons behind the economic and social phenomenon of monopolization. These classroom debates are usually very fruitful. As a learning facilitator, I summarize the ideas of both points of view, and then provide an explanation from an economist’s perspective. At the end, I’ll leave the students with a new question: What if *two* companies exist in the same market (like Boeing and Airbus)? With this question in mind, their intellectual curiosity steers the discussion toward an understanding of duopoly and oligopoly. I have found that discussion is extremely important in most economics classes, as it urges each student to think as a member of society. Pure lecture only makes students feel that economics is unrealistic and very far removed from them and their daily lives. A student who is not fully involved will not enjoy the learning process and thus not learn.

Empowerment is critical to push the learner forward. From my personal experience and my observations, I consider learning to be a non-linear process. Learning is about establishing a connection between beliefs already formed and ideas that are new. Often, the learner has to embrace a period of cognitive dissonance as he or she works to accept new knowledge. For some students, this process is not easy and may take a long while. A learning facilitator helps each student cope with that difficulty. When I explain an abstract idea (like price discrimination), I start with real life examples that are al-

ready familiar to my students (coupons are designed to identify those more sensitive to price changes). Using this practice, I find that students are not scared away from new concepts at the very beginning before they can even understand them. As the material goes harder and more math-intensive, I keep checking to make sure that my students are at the same place. I consistently remind students that my door is always open. Effective education occurs when the learner is able to use new knowledge and perspectives to update already-formed beliefs in a meaningful way. I do my best to keep learners from having negative experiences that lead to “I can’t get it, I give up” or “I don’t know, and I don’t want to know”.

Enriching the classroom environment helps avoid boredom and inspires greater learning. When students get bored, it becomes extremely difficult for them to concentrate and learn effectively. Strategies that help me enrich my courses include games, movies, the Internet, and humor. While demonstrating the idea of backward induction, an in-class Nim game catches everyone’s attention. While introducing the notion of Nash equilibrium, a scene from *A Beautiful Mind* is helpful to stimulate interest (although the same movie is not helpful for understanding the Nash equilibrium correctly and comprehensively). In the game theory class, students play online games against their fellow classmates as homework assignments, and they are always eager to discuss the results of these games in class. Finally, the use of humor with proper rhythm and tone not only helps me explain related study materials, but also make me more approachable to my students.

Respect is the cornerstone of a positive and safe learning environment. In every class I teach, the students know that I respect them and their time. On the first day of class, I spend ten minutes to introducing myself not as a teacher, but as a member of their classroom community. I tell the students who I am, where I come from, the movies I like, and the foods I hate. By the end of the second week, I have all of their names memorized. All the homework, quizzes, tests, and exams become useful feedback on where we are going, rather than cut and dried tools for judging their abilities. During class discussion, I make it very clear that there is no bad answer, only inadequate reasoning. I believe that, in a positive and safe learning environment, independent and critical thinking can be more easily fostered.

There are two questions that consistently guide me and reflect my teaching approach: How do different students with different knowledge backgrounds learn most effectively in the same classroom? How can homework assignments be crafted to give all learners useful feedback that advances their learning? To the first question, I find it challenging to balance the needs of students with their different backgrounds. While some students think I’m going too fast on a specific topic, others may ask me to speed up a little. To the second question, I have learned that even when a homework assignment covers the most detailed knowledge points, it may still lack the function of explaining the “big-picture” knowledge for a learner. I have attended several seminars on pedagogy and shared my vexations with others. Advice and suggestions from the senior educators help me to tackle these two problems in my future career. I will try to add in-class quizzes to provide feedback to students at different learning stages. Sectional review sessions could help the students connect all the knowledge points and then digest them as a whole.