

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Close to his retirement, my former teacher Dr. Truman Schwartz remarked that his students and not his research output are his only hope of becoming immortal. With an understanding of my own capabilities and limitations, I too have realized that my students represent my best chance at immortality. I therefore take teaching, both at the undergraduate and the graduate level, very seriously.

My approach to teaching is based on a few simple principles. First, I believe that teaching economics primarily involves conveying methods of analysis to students. However, for many topics, students also need to know some “facts” in order to gain a thorough understanding of the material. For example, students of international trade need not only understand comparative advantage and arguments for infant industry protection, it is just as important for them to know the rules that govern the World Trade Organization. It is the teacher’s responsibility that students pick up both facts and methods of analysis. However, I believe that teaching students facts that they can pick up through reading is not the best use of class time. Lectures should focus on making students think, and explaining topics that need explanation. Nevertheless, appropriate incentives must be given (e.g. through exams) to ensure that students do learn the facts on their own.

I am aware of the longstanding debate in academia concerning the relative merits of lectures versus discussion-based pedagogical styles. I have heard arguments that students are more engaged as discussants rather than as passive listeners. My position on this debate is slightly contrarian. I believe that a basic fact of higher education is that teachers know some things that students do not. A primary responsibility of the teacher is to transfer this knowledge to students. In my experience, the most effective way to transfer knowledge in economics is in lecture format. Having said that, I do agree that students learn more when they are actively involved in a class. My lecture style is

therefore based on asking students questions, encouraging them to solve “puzzles” as I bring them up, and share their ideas with their classmates. To provide students with the appropriate incentives, I grade participation in class and base exams on lectures rather than on textbook readings. This teaching style is most appropriate for small classes of up to 30 or 40 students, which is the type of classroom I am most familiar with. For larger classes, I would make necessary adjustments, such as more structured forms of participation by students.

I also recognize that students have different learning styles. I therefore use a variety of teaching methods, including lectures, independent study, and guided discussions of case studies drawn from media articles. Some of my assignments require independent work, while some others encourage cooperative learning. Diversification in teaching methods ensures that each student feels comfortable during some of my course, but is also challenged to learn in his/her less preferred environment. The use of case studies and “real-world” examples are an important supplement to lectures, since in my experience students are more responsive to material they can relate to. In addition, knowing the “real world” is itself a part of learning economics. Students of development must understand the scale of worldwide poverty and hunger or the human effects of AIDS in Africa, particularly if they have not spent time in a developing country.

Finally, active involvement in research is an important part of being a good teacher. Economics is an evolving field, and skills and knowledge required for advanced undergraduate and graduate teaching become obsolete quickly. Doing research in the field that one teaches ensures that the methods of analysis taught in class are at the “cutting edge”. Given my research interests and experience, currently I would be most comfortable teaching development, environmental economics and applied econometrics. To ensure that I remain a qualified teacher of these fields five or ten years down the road, I will continue to actively pursue my research interests in these fields.