

Teaching Philosophy

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I have noticed a common reaction from new acquaintances when I tell them I am an economist. Many immediately mention their impressions of economics from college, which take on three general forms. The first are those who love the mathematical rigor of the models they learned and the cleverness of the empirical methods common in the discipline. The second type is critical. They argue economists reduce complex systems so much that their conclusions lose all meaning and the data methods are so limited that they are not really worth considering seriously. The third is composed of those that simply do not engage because the math is too intimidating. At different points in my past, I myself have been each one.

I empathize with each of these perspectives, but they are all fates that I hope to avoid for my students. Economics provides ways to understand problems and answers that can be compelling, and are useful in a broad range of academic and professional settings. However, they require serious assumptions and nuanced thinking in their application. My goal is to enable my students to engage the discipline critically and understand its methods and ideas well enough to know its usefulness and limitations, when it is appropriate to apply its methods to a new question, and what they will be able to claim when they do.

My belief is the most exciting way to learn economics is through a type of guided discovery and application. In my experience, this is best done in a hybrid of lecture and class discussion, starting with the students' basic intuition. For example, most students already have a good idea of supply and demand. A basic economics model simply formalizes and provides structure to ideas that students often already understand. To build on class material, I favor using problem sets to push students to work through the nuances of the math independently. My problems sets will intentionally provoke students to identify what assumptions are in the mathematical structures they are using, and ask them whether they align with their understandings of reality.

As my students develop comfort with class material and puzzle through the problem sets, I want them to practice ways that the knowledge they acquire can be used in answering questions that are of value to academic debates or professional situations. To this end, I will require a short three-page memo that applies the content they have learned to a hypothetical problem faced by a decision maker who is not an economist. This type of assignment requires students to be concise, avoid using technical academic jargon, and to translate the ideas from the formal content from class back into an intuitive argument.

The most significant assignment I would require in my own teaching in upper-level courses is an attempt at original research and analysis that extends the experience of the memo and allows for the engagement of a more complex question. It would take place over the entirety of a semester, where students would work in groups, and with me in office hours to apply knowledge in class to answer a question of their choice related to some line of academic literature or an active policy debate with a dimension related to economics. The deliverable would be a term paper, which the students would present to their peers at the end of the term.

To assess students' performances in my courses, I will grade the memo and the original research deliverable using criterion-based grading. I will be looking for clarity in the students' argument, their success in appropriating findings in the economics literature in service of their argument, their

demonstrated understanding of the concepts they apply from class, and their writing. I plan to grade the problem sets on a “check/check plus” basis to encourage risk taking and exploration of the content without much concern for the implications for the grade or stress of “finding the right answer.”

As I teach, I will prioritize interaction with my students to get a sense of their comfort with the material. I will ask questions, monitor engagement, and frequently require in-class activities with output that I can collect and analyze outside of class. If particular methods are unsuccessful, I will experiment with new techniques and will work closely with colleagues in the economics department (and other departments) to learn what was effective for them in their careers. I will analyze anonymous assessments from students during and after the course to check for honest feedback on my instruction, assignment structure, office hours support, and grading.

As a whole, I aim to expose my students to the rich sets of skills and ways of thinking that studying economics can offer, and develop in them engagement and appreciation for the discipline beyond the simplistic feelings of complete acceptance, or rejection, either through feeling discouraged by the math, or by the simplifying assumptions economists often use. Through this, I am hopeful my students can enter the world after my classes with an ability to carefully use methods common in economics to inform their understanding of the world around them, and to enable success in their future academic and professional pursuits.