

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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“If you can’t actually take an idea outside the classroom and use it, you don’t really get it. But once you use it on your own, it is yours forever.”

- Robert H. Frank[†]

Basic economic principles are like a set of new eyeglasses. If communicated clearly and in a relevant manner they can provide a clearer picture of the world.

My primary goal as a teacher is to present the analytical framework of economics. My secondary goal is to get students excited about their new perspective on an issue and see them apply it to other areas or in discussions with their peers.

The biggest challenge in this effort, as suggested in the quote by Robert Frank above, is to make economics relevant for students. I want students to appreciate the unique value of the tools of economics in understanding individual choice, economic interaction in market and non-market settings, and the consequences of such interaction.

To gain a sense of which specific problems are important to my students I usually encourage them at the beginning of a class to share their understanding of a topic. I have found that doing this is not only helpful for locating their interests, but also helps the students to situate the new topic in their existing knowledge base.

I proceed by presenting the economic way of thinking about the particular issue. In doing so, it is of principle importance to me that students understand that economics rests on a few, very plausible, basic concepts and simple analytical tools. These tools can be applied to virtually every instance of human decision-making in a way that generates relevant insights. To support this effort, I employ the following teaching strategies:

First, I take the time to carefully articulate the ideas and insights of economics. To accommodate different learning styles, I present key concepts verbally, diagrammatically, and mathematically. To connect the principle in question to the students’ preconceived understanding, I return to their original articulation of the issue and confront it with the new, enlightened understanding, which the economic way of thinking provides. This usually results in a classroom discussion during which concepts are reiterated and misunderstandings resolved.

Second, I assign readings that discuss the topic further and have found that short quizzes at the beginning of each class, which ask basic questions about the assigned readings, help students in retaining and understanding the material better. In addition to the required readings I

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[†] The Economic Naturalist. Basic Books: New York, p. 10

always point students to additional readings, usually by bringing a book on the current topic to class and passing it around. I've had very good success with this method in past classes. The best students have always picked up additional readings, which not only facilitate a better understanding of an issue for themselves but also help to invigorate the in class discussions with their peers.

Third, I design assignments to facilitate a deeper understanding and retention of the material. After the completion of a topic I ask students in a principles class to write a short one page essay explaining a concept from class using an example from their own experience. This helps students to internalize the issue and connect it to their own life; it also refines their pre-conceived beliefs and questions their understanding of the economy. In a more advanced class I reinforce the understanding of the class material with assignments that practice the use of the analytical framework. I have found that such exercises develop students' economic thinking skills as well as their economic intuition.

I believe that economics is most powerful when the economic intuition is conveyed in a way that students find relevant for their lives. Too often, economics is seen as unrealistic, a strictly academic enterprise, or consisting of concepts that do not apply to most cases. Teaching approaches that utilize modeling while focusing on the intuition behind the arguments reinforce the relevance of economics. If I communicate the framework clearly, students can understand the economic intuition and internalize the economic logic, in which case they leave my class with the ability and confidence to participate in conversations about society's economic problems—as students, future leaders, and concerned citizens. If students use their informed opinions to contribute with clarity to discussions at a higher level, I have achieved my goal as a teacher.