

My Teaching Philosophy

I love to teach economics.

This isn't surprising. Most of us who have chosen to become economists have a love affair with the discipline. It opened our eyes to a world more rich and complex than we could have ever imagined prior. And being able to share this insight with others is a distinct pleasure.

As I have taken an increasing interest in the teaching of economics, I am often times asked to justify the need for undergraduates to take an economics course. I find many of the traditional justifications to be unconvincing. Certainly, one of the primary wonders of economics is that economic processes enrich our lives without people having the slightest idea how they work. Certainly, something could be said for an economically informed populace in a democratic polity, but this could be said of any number of disciplines. And while the work of professional economists is certainly important, occupational training for this career is best left to graduate programs.

Learning economics at the undergraduate level should be about expanding the critical faculties of the mind. And economics is ideally suited to this purpose because, if taught right, economics, of all disciplines, has the greatest potential to surprise.

Economics is radical. It counters conventional wisdom and does so with piercing logic. And this makes it uniquely capable of changing minds. As a teacher of economics I have had many opportunities to watch this process unfold before me. The heretofore "buzzing, blooming confusion" that marks the typical mind's view of society and self yields to a variety of causal pathways never before considered. This is the "economic way of thinking" referred to in the first chapter of nearly every economics text book. And the power of economics to surprise is the power to effect this transformation.

My economics courses are designed to elicit just this sort of surprise. This is no mean feat with students coming of age in the midst of a revolution in communications. First and foremost, it behooves every educator to recognize that we are in fierce competition for the attention of young people. Moreover, these students, beset on all sides by information, have honed the skill of tuning out. The good news is that the technologies that have made our job more difficult have also given us the tools to engage students like never before. And these technologies play a critical role in all of my courses.

For starters, my lectures incorporate dynamic PowerPoint presentations with custom animations designed to bring to life the graphics necessary to demonstrate economic dynamics. I am also working to incorporate clicker technology into each lecture, a feature that will demand constant engagement from the students throughout the lecture and resolve attendance difficulties without resorting to time-wasting roll calls.

Youtube videos demonstrating the real-world application of economic ideas are a popular addition this semester. In my effort to leverage the power of surprise, I make it a point to be provocative in my lectures. I stress to my students that economics has the power to shape the world and with that power comes controversy. Youtube provides an excellent opportunity for showcasing each side of divisive issues and allowing students to engage the debate using their newly acquired economic vocabulary and perspectives.

It should be stressed that my primary goal in every course is that students learn the language and techniques used by economists to examine and describe the world. For this goal to be met, students must internalize the material we cover in class and in the text by means of engaging challenging and constructive coursework.

To this end, I have been using Aplia, an online coursework site, to craft my assignments. The advantages to online homework are substantial. Students are able to perform exercises and receive instant feedback that helps them to understand which questions they answered incorrectly and, most importantly, why. The power of this instant feedback to help students retain information cannot be understated. I have recently joined several other educators in working with Aplia on the development of a new coursework format that will give students several opportunities to answer a question correctly before allowing them to move on. In my opinion, this is a major pedagogical innovation that will most benefit students traditionally most challenged by economics courses.

In all of my courses, students are asked to apply the sometimes dry and abstract economic concepts we discuss to the world in which they live. To this end, they post short informal essays to a course “blog,” a public website where their classmates can read and comment on their ideas. This is often the most rewarding portion of the class as students have the opportunity to utilize their new critical thinking skills and economic literacy.

But so far as the power of surprise is crucial to teaching economic thinking, no recent innovation can match economic experiments.

Economic experiments involve simulating economic environments on networked computer terminals. Some of these experiments involve buying and selling fictitious goods; others allow students to be placed in decision environments described by classic game theory. In each, students have the opportunity to earn course “dollars.” These dollars earned by my students can be used to purchase extra credit points on exams and assignments.

The edifying power of economics experiments is their ability to place students into the myriad contexts described in class. Doing so allows the critical recognition of the incentives faced by individual economic actor. But an even more illuminating feature of these experiments is the opportunity for students to get a bird’s eye view of their behavior in the context of the behavior of other students in the experiment. They are then able to create new, more nuanced stories about otherwise unconscious economic decisions they make every day.

From my own experience and the experience of countless other students who have participated in these experiments, it is clear that no amount of lecturing, reading, writing, or coursework has the same transformative power of these experiments. And it is my primary career goal to put this technology in the reach of educators everywhere.

Teaching and learning economics can be a chore. But it shouldn’t be. Economists are blessed with a radical topic and an audience of young people who relish surprise. With the teaching techniques made possible by new technology, teaching economics is a joy for both instructor and student.