Philosophy of Teaching

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“Will this be on the test?” In academic settings, this frighteningly familiar refrain is ubiquitous. Every teacher has heard it. Every teacher dreads it. This question reveals a student focused on memorizing just enough information to allow them to regurgitate it back on an exam. It indicates a student who defines their academic success as a number on a piece of paper. When I hear that sentiment expressed I take it as a challenge because my goal as an educator is to go beyond simply teaching students to memorize facts. I want to guide students to a deeper understanding of the world to help them find their place in it.

I am a believer in the value of a broad, general education, but also believe those ideas must be related to the real world. One of my strengths as an educator is my ability to connect and apply abstract concepts. Economics is a powerful framework for viewing and analyzing real world issues. This was one of the things that drew me to the discipline and one of the reasons I love to teach it.

Last year, as a teaching assistant for Intermediate Macroeconomics, I found that towards the middle of that course, my students were getting lost in jargon they “knew” but did not fully understand. They were unable to connect all the ideas of the open economy IS-LM model cleanly together and to the real world. I recognized this issue and decided to deviate from the typical format of my sections: going over concepts and definitions or solving problems. Instead, I took a class to dive into the history of the Great Recession. I used the historical economic events and statistics from that period, the basics of which they were familiar, and connected them to topics and concepts covered in class. By explicitly making this connection I helped my students develop a more robust understanding, allowed them to engage with the material in a deeper way, and expanded their framework for understanding the world.

This fall, I created, developed, and executed a first-year writing seminar exploring the US health care system, and I approached this seminar with the same vision. I gave my students a one class crash course in the economic principles of incentives, trade-offs, and price theory. They have been able to use these concepts to analyze different aspects of the healthcare system, and intelligently wrestle with the pertinent issues. When we discussed Medicaid, I did not simply present the information about Medicaid coverage and demonstrate how this varies from state to state. Instead, I created representative people for my students. They then investigated whether these hypothetical people would be eligible for Medicaid in their home state and what they would need to do to enroll. Students were enthusiastic about this experiential learning opportunity and were able to learn more than just the dollar value of income limits, remaining detached from the human component. Without prompting, they noticed some administrative difficulties and absurdities and as a result felt compassion for and connected to a segment of the population with which few had personal experience.

Seeing my students engaged and interested is affirming. However, by nature, I also constantly question and evaluate everything and my teaching effectiveness is no exception. I recognize that I am a young teacher and I have a lot to learn. Positive interactions with students in class and office hours, while helpful, are not sufficient indicators of whether I am achieving my goals as an instructor. I regularly solicit student feedback and implement anonymous, mid-semester evaluations. I think of my exams and problem sets as a tool to evaluate myself as much as the students. To serve my students better, I consistently use this feedback to tweak and enhance my lesson plans.

I desire to continually grow as an educator. I want to maintain my level of enthusiasm and passion for learning and believe intentionally investing in my own growth as an educator is key to this process. I am committed to pursuing professional teaching development through seminars, conferences or informal advice from peers. As part of that commitment, I have asked outside observers to provide feedback on my lectures and welcome continued mentorship. Also, last year I applied for, and was accepted into Cornell’s Center for Teaching Excellence Graduate Teaching Fellows program. I benefited significantly from the opportunity to think about teaching methods, talk about pedagogy and educational theory and become involved in teaching others. I want to be an effective teacher in practice, not just in theory.
Being an effective educator also requires that I am an active scholar, keeping abreast on relevant issues and, in turn, applying knowledge to real world problems. This allows me to invite students into a rich educational experience, grounded in principles, but observed and applied in the real world. In my aforementioned seminar, I have been able to use my own research and knowledge of the latest developments to inform students about the current successes and struggles of our healthcare system. Being an active scholar is an important and essential part of my teaching as my teaching is informed and strengthened by my research.

I am qualified and ready to teach a variety of courses in addition to the core courses of microeconomics, macroeconomics, empirical methods and game theory. I have experience as an instructor of a first-year writing seminar and would be happy to teach a similar course again. My research is focused on health economics and industrial organization. Finally, my graduate coursework in public finance, behavioral economics and development has prepared me to teach those as well. I enjoy new challenges and would embrace the opportunity to teach new courses.

I also am prepared to provide students educational experiences outside the classroom. As an undergraduate student, I spent two summers and a semester working as a research assistant. This experience was a valuable and, in some ways, formative part of my education. I learned practical skills, but also benefited from open-ended exploration. As a graduate student, I had the privilege of having a research assistant this past summer. I sought to give him a similarly valuable experience by meeting weekly, providing basic training in statistical programs and setting attainable goals that allowed leeway for innovation.

I desire to not just inform my students about the world and provide isolated learning opportunities, but to inspire them to think about their place in it, wrestle with questions of social justice and ponder how they can make an impact for the future. Teaching is an awesome responsibility and an incredible privilege. I know college students, by simply attaining a degree, will be in a position of power in our society and I embrace my responsibility to mentor and guide them as they navigate how to acknowledge and use this power. As an instructor, I model respect for students and am mindful both of how I use my authority and manage classroom power dynamics. I seek to actively encourage inclusiveness and diversity. I, personally, have been challenged and stretched through my interactions with diverse groups of people and believe that it is critical part of a holistic educational experience.

I believe my students are adults and I treat them as such - giving them that level of respect and expecting that level of responsibility. I expect them to work hard, and push them to excel. Research has shown that an individual who believes their talents can be developed, can achieve more than one who believes talent is fixed. With my students I actively work against a fixed mindset. Instead, I work to impress a growth mindset by expressing my confidence in them and their ability to succeed if they try. I recognize college is a time of significant transition and my course is a small portion of their life’s journey. Each student enters with their own background, their own experiences and will face their own difficulties. I care about my students holistically. I work provide an environment that frees students up to approach me, both by humanizing myself through anecdotes or well-placed self-deprecating humor and by getting to know them personally. This allows me to be sensitive to my students emotional and social needs and challenges, and gives me the space to check in with students who appear to be struggling.

I am a big picture educator. I seek to enlarge the picture of the world for my students, while being aware of the bigger picture of their life. Today’s performance and metric-driven society pushes students to memorize for the test. This mentality inhibits students’ ability to strive for a deep level of understanding that requires knowing more than just facts and ideas, but also how these facts and ideas connect and interrelate. It is in these connections that understanding happens. As students relate concepts and ideas together, and see them playing out in theory and practice, their view of the world changes and becomes richer. The rich, interlocking patterns and connections reveal a beautiful world and I teach to unlock this beauty for my students.