

Teaching philosophy statement

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You enter a classroom filled with beautiful, slightly unsettling jazz music. You wonder why your calm, reasonable teacher started his 8 am Development Economics with this lively, original experience, but you soon learn that you are listening to Fela Kuti, an influential Nigerian musician and activist. You open your eyes and your ears, forget about the cold auditorium, and even dare to ask a question about the strong political lyrics. And before you realize it, the lecture on “Institutions” has started, moving from students’ initial reactions to a structured lecture based on Fela Kuti’s struggle and on your teacher’s own fieldwork experience in Africa. When you leave the classroom an hour later, surprised by the ring bell, you will not only have learned new theories about rent seeking behaviors and corruption: you will also have started to think in a novel manner about development- and feel ready to engage with the challenges of the developing world that you now better understand.

I want my students to leave the classroom empowered. My core objective is to provide my students with the ability to apply analytical and critical thinking to a given economic situation so that they can both understand and address a particular issue by themselves. Among undergraduate students for instance, a major step is learning the difference between a personal opinion and a structured analysis. I want student to be able to think about corruption not only as a morally reprehensible act, but as a rational economic behavior, in order to better tackle it by setting appropriate institutions. Developing this analytical and critical thinking requires a strong understanding and mastery of the course material, including the history of the discipline, on which I put a strong emphasis. Fostering this form of thinking also generates more self-confident and collaborative students, and stimulates their curiosity for future learning, which empowers them further as individuals and professionals, regardless of their future field or position.

As an old, cranky and witty professor told me many times during my undergraduate years, “teaching is repeating”. What I myself discovered when giving lectures in Introduction to macro-economics is that the key part is about the *shape* of this repetition, which has to be a *variation* around the theory explained rather than a redundant and hence unhelpful reiteration. One of the beauties of economics is that any concept can be explained in a multitude of ways, whether as a narrative, a graph or an equation. Some students will favor an inductive approach by starting with an empirical example– which often works best with first year classes– or on the contrary prefer starting with a theoretical exposition. I consider myself lucky, as a teacher, to have a very patient personality, which makes it easy for me to repeat, listen, and guide carefully students towards their own understanding. Mistake after mistake, I push them to apply their own analytical thinking and find answers, without rushing them towards the “correct answer”. I felt very proud when, after several sessions, one student whom I was tutoring understood for the first time the concept of marginal cost and was able to solve “how much wheat a farmer should produce”. As a full-time French teacher, I found errors extremely productive, and tried to balance tangents, pauses, and improvisation outside of the prepared material with quick syntheses after interactive, lively exchanges to provide the class with solid, take-away lessons. This facilitation is an art rather than a science and essential one to making teaching and learning into challenging and exciting experiences.

When teaching economics, I found useful to make frequent connections to my own research to illustrate abstract concepts, connect theory and evidence, and stimulate students’ interest, especially in introductory classes. My extensive fieldwork experience in developing countries is a pedagogical asset, since my examples frequently stimulates my students’ curiosity and can be illustrated with my own photographs.

And how to better illustrate the concept of transaction costs than in a village setting in Africa where women and children spend hours walking to fetch water or go to school? Some students favor examples which are closer to their daily experience: for that reason, I try to make economics *personal* and show how the concepts presented apply to their own purchasing habits, time management, or decision making. When adopting this strategy, lectures on a highly mathematical topic such as game theory are thought-provoking and quickly accessible for students. Pushing my students to reflect about their own experience (through specific take-home assignments) also contributes to develop their ethnographic and analytical skills.

One of the greatest challenges for teacher is to make their teaching fully clear and relevant for a diverse audience. Having grown up and studied in culturally and economically diverse settings has made me sensitive to the wide range of challenges students may face and thus to the necessity of creating an inclusive learning environment for everybody to progress. When training surveyors in Burkina Faso, I stayed an additional hour every evening with those requiring more time to understand the questionnaire and made them work in pairs with more advanced students during the day. I developed a flexible teaching style, which does not rely on recipes but fully adapts to the diverse groups with whom I have worked. As a language teacher for instance I insisted on rigor and syntax with very active students, but instead focused on making students participate in class when their main challenge was shyness. In that context, I found the key is to set explicitly, from the beginning, high standards— and to provide each student with the means to reach these standards, whether with additional material, time during office hours, or guidance to specific campus resources. Students must develop their autonomy while having someone to help them overcome difficulties: obtaining advice while finding their own efficient (and enjoyable) working methods. Reaching the right balance as a teacher is critical for accomplishing my core objective of fostering student's analytical and critical skills and requires being very attentive to every student's reactions and progress.

For that reason, assessment for improvement is at the core of my teaching. This first manifests in real-time, in the classroom, for I soon realized that asking “is it clear?” is not enough to ensure full comprehension. There are many strategies I use to check understanding, from 1 to 5 finger or clicker polls (with 5 being “I could teach the concept myself”) to ungraded quizzes which focus on analytical and critical application of the course material. Perhaps even more importantly, I ask students to assess my own teaching. One error I committed in a language class was to record (graded) oral participation during the class and to discover at the end of the semester that this made some of my students very uncomfortable. I do not let similar surprises happen again: I require anonymous feedback from my students after a few weeks and then adjust the class accordingly. Finally, I set up very clear expectations regarding graded assignments and make sure that every student masters the material by providing homework practice tests on sample examinations and ample office hours. I strongly believe that assignments should not discourage students but rather are an opportunity to think analytically, and should inspire hope and raise aspirations—which according to development economists, is key to generate a virtuous circle of success.

I certainly hope that my passion for teaching, palpable through my devotion to my task will convince some of my students to become economists. I hope that it will not convince all of them. Rather, I feel that I will have fulfilled my role if all of my students take-up the content, methods, and analytical thinking which they learned during my class to serve all kinds of situations, disciplines, and careers. For instance, an anthropologist told me one day that the concept of a counter-factual, which she learnt about through our conversations, changed her life and the way she sees the world. My ultimate goal is to provide my students with the knowledge and tools to make the world a better place in the way they decide, as practitioners or political philosophers, as managers, scholars, and citizens. And in the meantime, I hope to change their life, one class at a time.