

# Teaching Philosophy

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As a teacher, my goal is to foster critical thinking skills and help students develop the intellectual ability to analyze policy in thoughtful ways that are grounded in facts and economic theory alike. Indeed, academic economists make their greatest long-run contributions to society by teaching newer generations of students. In my experience, teaching is also the most rewarding and enriching part of being an academic. The fact that teaching benefits students is connected to the fact that it enriches teachers. Teaching is effective when a teacher learns alongside her students: the very same learning that benefits students also benefits the effective teacher. For example, I utilize the conceptual distinction between statistical and taste-based discrimination in my research, but helping students write undergraduate research papers on discrimination forced me to think more deeply than I had before about the difficulties associated with identifying taste-based discrimination, as I helped students to see that their own projects were not, as they thought, cleanly distinguishing the two kinds of discrimination.

Teachers model learning. If I fail to convey to my students that I am learning in the course, my experience is that the students are less likely to learn themselves. For example, one semester I was asked to lead a discussion on a specific text in the history of science (Plato's *Timeaeus*) so many times that, without realizing it, I had developed an unofficial checklist of passages which I offered up to students one by one. Once I realized this had happened to me, I had to resist my impulse to simply go down this list of passages, and to force myself to start in a new spot with new questions. I love teaching because I love learning; I never teach a course the same way twice. For example, when I taught a discussion-based Introduction to Philosophy course, I recognized that different groups of students would be interested in different aspects of the same text, and so I often focused the discussion on different parts of the text in my first class than in my second class. I vary my classes in this way partly in response to differences in student interest or class size, but also to ensure that I stay engaged, energetic and alive with the material as I go through the process of learning.

I design course-content to engage students. I favor essay-style assignments over multiple choice tests and student presentations over long lectures. I aim to select material that is both rich and accessible. One way that I try to introduce *richness* and excite student wonder is by including groundbreaking texts from famous thinkers: properly selected portions of classical texts challenge students by asking them to think outside their immediate frame of reference. One way I try to make class *accessible* is by ensuring that students are always given examples drawn from their own lives. Part of my class preparation process involves coming up with examples likely to be accessible to students; sometimes I borrow these examples from recent research papers I've read, but sometimes they derive from popular TV shows or local sporting events. I also ask the class to provide their own examples of each key concept in the course. In this way, I try to ensure that students can see how the course material both *speaks to* their lives, and how it addresses enduring questions that extend far *beyond* the immediacy of their lives.

My chief goal in teaching is to foster critical thinking skills. Students are, of course, evaluated largely on their ability to master field-specific knowledge, but the general intellectual development which I hope to occasion in my classes should benefit students regardless of major. Indeed, it is my conviction that general critical thinking skills will benefit students not only during their time in school, but throughout their entire lives. My goal is to help students develop their existing gifts and capacities, rather than, to use a famous image, to pour sight into blind eyes. Because this is my goal, I favor discussion-based active-learning techniques and writing-based assignments, as I mentioned above. In addition to favoring discussion-based courses and writing-based assignments, I also aim to create an academic environment that encourages students to be as active as possible with course material, even outside of class. For example, in introductory courses where the students may have diverse academic backgrounds and may not yet have developed an appreciation for the subject-matter of the course, I find that students are more active when I assign small amounts of work frequently, rather than large amounts less frequently (e.g., weekly response papers instead of end of term projects). If a class is to change a student's life, it must lead the student to update how she interacts with the larger world. As an instructor, I hold myself to a similar standard – I have to update my course based on student responses. For example, if I find that student performance on an exam or an assignment to be skewed in a certain direction, I try to reformat future assessments to avoid this discrepancy.

My conviction is that learning is best achieved by allowing speaking and writing to complement and reinforce each other. A conversation can be a helpful jump-start to a written paper; writing ideas down can be invaluable to speaking about them clearly. So, methodologically speaking, I structure classes and assignments to encourage *both* speaking and writing. I always structure classes to encourage conversation. When classes are small enough, this means moving desks around so that students face each other and encouraging students to question and address each other rather than always addressing me. In addition to encouraging discussion, taking the focus away from me allows students to move in and out of the role of teacher and the role of student. When classes are too large to implement a seminar, I still structure my class lecture in ways that elicit student discussion. Some active-learning techniques I have used include small-group activities where students discuss specific prompts, work through specific problem sets, or give each other feedback on papers.

My experience is that for students to learn, assessment must be fair in an obvious and transparent way. Accordingly, I work hard to show students that I am being fair by clearly articulating measurable learning outcomes with every major assignment and utilizing the latest available classroom technologies. For example, when I assign a writing prompt I provide students with the rubric I will use when I evaluate their work ahead of time. I always post the prompt and rubric on a course webpage and make all their assignments and grades accessible online. I also show students that I am being fair by eliciting student feedback frequently and making adjustments through the course when necessarily. For example, I give each student an evaluation form in the middle of the course in which I ask the student to detail *both* what I am doing well and can improve upon *and* what the student herself is doing well and can improve upon. This has two benefits: first it forces each student to reflect on her effort in the classes and second, it gives me an opportunity to see if something I am doing seems unfair to a significant portion of students. If something seems unfair to many students, I can usually make subtle adjustments midway in the class to honor their sense of fairness. Likewise, student self-evaluation will sometimes reveal to a student whether some of the things that seem unfair about the

course might be due, at least in part, to the student's own lack of effort or misplaced expectations. In general, I clearly articulate my expectations for students and I give students a chance to articulate any frustrations that may arise, because I have found that doing these things creates an environment in which students feel that they are being treated fairly.

In my classes, I value both diversity of opinion and diversity of background. Diversity of opinion is at the heart of active policy discussion; indeed, the most engaged and intense class discussions I have led have been between students who disagreed about a specific issue. The goal of these discussions is not for either student to change her opinion, but for every student to develop the ability to debate the merits of a given policy thoughtfully and understand why an intelligent and informed person could disagree with them. Diversity of background provides a rich set of perspectives for class discussion. Because policy and economic analysis concerns the whole of society, and society is composed of many heterogeneous groups – whose interests are often distinct and even opposed and whose values and cultural frameworks may differ in radical ways – a policy discussion between discussants with similar backgrounds will inevitably fail to get at some of the societal complexity that can be introduced only through a diversity of backgrounds.

Because I am passionate about my research and my research concerns policies which have affected racial inequity, I plan to bring my own research into the classroom when I teach. For example, my research shows how racially motivated restrictions to credit markets implemented in the 1930s still contribute to present day racial inequities and help to explain why Black and Hispanic households experience a disproportionate share of crime victimizations. Similarly, another research project of mine shows how expansions to early childhood education implemented in the 1960s influenced how likely a child was to be convicted of a crime as an adult. These research projects are both examples of policy analysis that speak to issues students are likely to be already interested in such as crime, incarceration and racism, but also encourage students to think back to the Great Depression era and the Great Society era and see how policies from a time only their parents or even grandparents remember had lasting effects today. I do not think of teaching as a secondary activity I perform to be able to pursue the primary activity of research; just as research can enhance teaching, I think that teaching can enhance research. When a researcher presents her research at the undergraduate level the researcher is forced to present it at a basic, fundamental level, which forces the researcher to think about how to convey results and institutional background in the simplest and most accessible way possible.