

# Teaching Philosophy

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As a student, I had always thought that good teaching was all about being charming, funny and eloquent. It wasn't until I became a graduate student instructor (GSI) that I realized how much hard work goes into leading a good class. Charm, humor and rhetoric can only get me so far; to be an effective teacher, I have to do more. In the following, I discuss some of what I learned from experience that guide and shape my teaching philosophy, and which help me be an effective teacher in a variety of subject areas, including political economy of development, experimental methods, public policy, and comparative politics.

**Big idea first.** My first ever teaching assignment was to be a GSI for a PhD-level microeconomics class at the University of the Philippines School of Economics. I had only recently taken the course myself, and so on my first day, I was a nervous wreck. I went to the board and started drawing a circle with swirling curves inside, and the moment I did, I felt really stupid. But it was the lesson plan that I prepared for the day so I stuck with it. "This is the world," I quavered, pointing at my drawing. "It is too complicated for us to understand right now." Growing more confident, I started erasing some curves until only two crisscrossing lines remained in the circle. "To gain insights about the world, we simplify a lot of things and focus only on some aspects of it. Economic models are all about simplifying the world." I paused, briefly scanned the room, and saw heads nodding in understanding. This exercise helped my students understand why for the next 3 months we would be looking at the firm as a 'black box' and the consumer as a 'self-interested individual'.

**Students are not equally interested.** This is ever so true in general education courses such as the Economics 101 subject at the University of Michigan. At the beginning of every term, when my students get the chance to introduce themselves to their classmates, I ask them what they would have been doing if they were not in my discussion section. (I find it almost always causes the students to brighten up.) Most of the time they come up with much more fun things to do, like napping, working-out, sunbathing, or binge-watching TV. After everyone has gotten the chance to talk, I start the discussion by telling the class that what each of them had just said is an example of the *opportunity cost* of going to my section. (Opportunity Cost is Lesson #1 in Econ 101.) Whether or not they were aware of it, the fact that they showed up in section and chose to forego the utility of enjoying their next best activity was an example of how pervasive economic decision-making was in their lives. By making the subject matter a bit more relevant, students become a bit more interested in them.

**Students learn differently.** In an Introduction to Comparative Politics class, I motivate the discussion of Robert Dahl's framework for mapping regime types by asking students to pick a country and then to rate the level of freedom and contentment of people in that country. I build a dataset of their responses, in real time, in an Excel sheet that's projected on a screen. Once all data is in, I match their answers with data on countries' polyarchy scale (Coppedge and Reinicke 1990). I then generate a graph to show that polyarchies, unsurprisingly, tend to be the countries where people lead happier lives—even according to their own ratings! Not only do students get an appreciation for why we should care about democratization, importantly, students also find otherwise abstract concepts and unfamiliar analytical tools accessible through visual and tactile learning.

**Give every lesson a structure.** In some cases, students show up in class without any clue what the day's lesson is about. I always begin discussion by providing an overview of what we will cover in section, and I try to end section by summarizing what we had just covered in class. In between, I establish a pedagogical pattern that students eventually become familiar with, which generally involves a short lecture on key concepts and various opportunities to check their understanding. In my experience, students' attention waxes and wanes, so by making them become familiar with the structure of the section, they at least know when they have to pay close attention.

**Ask less interesting questions in more interesting ways.** When I think about questions to ask in class to check students' understanding of the material, I try to avoid questions that solicit mechanical and/or from-the-book answers. Instead of asking, "What are the reasons for why an authoritarian regime can be bad for development?" I ask, "Why do you think North Korea is much less economically developed than South Korea today?" This way, there are no 'wrong' answers, and students are encouraged to speak-out their thoughts and participate in class conversation, even those who did not get the chance to read the material prior to coming to class.

**Finally, teaching never gets old.** I always bear in mind that, as a teacher, I make an impression on my students' lives, however marginally. Even as I teach the same class for the third time in a row and feel it's getting old, I think about the possibility that there could be one student in my class who would develop an insight or idea from the discussion that could change his/her life. After all, I made a lifetime decision of becoming a social scientist just by attending an Econ 101 class that taught me the explanatory power of a simple production possibilities frontier for guns and butter.