

Statement of Teaching Philosophy: Devika Hazra

“The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards.” - A. Francis

Many students begin to study Economics with the objective of being able to understand and interpret the forces at work that drive an economy. More specifically, in the light of the current events like the housing bubble, the financial recession and the fiscal crisis, they come to class with the expectation that they will be able to answer why these events occurred and what caused them. Economics, however, is a far broader science that analyses on one hand, the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services and on the other hand, the performance, structure, behavior, and decision-making of an economy as a whole. With this in mind, my principle goal as an instructor is to excite the students about the subject, create in them a desire to know more and then impart the knowledge and concepts that will broaden their horizon. By the end of a semester, I intend my students to be able to recognize the foundational principles of economics as applied to everyday life and the economy as a whole. I also believe that it is my responsibility to equip students with alternative methods of understanding and learning, and enabling them to relate assessments with the goals in class.

Learning is the process of receiving new knowledge and skill in order to reinforce or build upon existing ones, or modify it based on new information. My broad goal in any class is to lead the students from their existing plane of knowledge to a higher one on a certain topic. For learning to take place, there must be interest in the topic. In order to pique students' interest, I often begin by asking a question about a commonly observed phenomenon, coaxing them to think about why and how the phenomenon occurs, thereby, triggering a discussion in the classroom. Discussion helps not only to create an anticipation in the students about the topic but it also enables me to get an understanding of their prior knowledge on that subject. Students do not come to class as blank slates, and bring with them preconceived notions about observed economic phenomenon. Examples include the belief that financial and physical capital is the same, technical progress creates unemployment, etc. This, in turn, might manifest into a lack of appreciation and understanding for the more historical and theoretical aspects of economics.

As a teacher and researcher in economics, it is important for me to facilitate their reconciling economic theory and observed economic phenomenon. Therefore, one of my goals is to help students see the relevance of academic concepts to their own lives. One effective tool for me, to achieve this is asking the students to observe activities occurring around them. For example, while teaching Intermediate Microeconomics I asked the students to do an assignment where they observe any activity around them and identify the economic principle behind it. This could be things like the law of diminishing marginal utility, externalities in activities, etc. Another time, I asked them to pick a product of their choice and to identify the market structure in that industry. Furthermore, I use clips from YouTube as a discussion tool or to make something more memorable for the students. For example, the humor in “Mankiw’s Ten Principles of Economics translated by Yoram Bauman” has often made it easier for students to retain the ten principles. Using current news also helps students to understand concepts. I believe that solving problems in class has been a very effective tool in facilitating students to grasp difficult concepts. Students become more engaged in the learning process when their interests are being stimulated and their personal beliefs are challenged.

Although one of my general goals is to equip students with new concepts such that their knowledge horizon is broadened on the subject is raised, however, discipline-based learning goals differ from class to class. At the introductory level, students should be able to define and describe topics in very simple words and also be able to give examples. For instance, they should be able to differentiate between nominal and real interest rates, or state the relationship between prices and aggregate supply in the short and long run. On analyzing the student evaluations from the first introductory class I taught, I changed my teaching style from content-

centered to student-centered. I was able to do so with the help of the training received at the Graduate Teaching Academy. In an intermediate level class, I intend for my students to also be able to solve small problems based on the course content, and apply concepts. For example, I expect them to analyze the effect of an increase in money supply on output using the ISLM framework. If I were to teach a graduate level course, I would have an even higher objective for the students; namely, to reconstruct, modify and criticize a topic; which would help build research skills of the students.

One of my teaching strategies is to expose students to different ways of understanding the material. Since the pace of learning differs from one student to another, I believe repetition of concepts using multiple methods can be helpful for them. I use power-point slides to demonstrate a topic, but I feel that is not enough. Hence, I often facilitate group discussions in class. Still at other times I assign group or individual tasks such as of finding one fact about a topic I will teach in the next class session. At times, one or more students will come up with a fact I had not included in my presentation of the topic. On such occasions, I try to incorporate that in the lecture by improvisation or postpone it to the next class. Either way, I make sure I have addressed that fact or information. For instance, once a student wanted to know about the unconventional policy tool that the Federal Reserve has been using since the financial recession of 2008. I explained the methods in that class itself but provided more details of how it affects the real economy in the next class. I also expose students to different ways of understanding the material by providing them with study guides and problems similar to those solved in class. Summarizing the material at the end of each class, and beginning the next class by highlighting the main points of the previous class is very useful. One other avenue that I make available for my students is discussion after class; I like to make myself approachable and available to answer questions. I believe that it is important to spend time in class to reflect on materials already covered and help students make the connection between all the small topics taught, and thereby see the bigger frame.

I often ask questions in class on the material taught in the previous class and provide students with pointers to help them answer those questions. This also helps them understand how to approach questions in assignments, quizzes or exams. I use “one minute paper” survey or i-clicker responses as informal assessment techniques to get immediate feedback from students, which allows me to pace my instruction. Sometimes I ask them to solve a problem in class in order for me to understand where they stand in terms of applying the concepts. I prefer to use multiple avenues of formal assessment including examinations, quizzes, group discussions and small projects. The type of assessment depends largely on the class I am teaching. I have found that multiple choice type questions are effective in introductory classes, where I mainly want to test if they remember and understand concepts covered in class. However, for an intermediate or advanced level class, questions that simply ask students to recall facts without assessing them critically is not enough. In such cases I use short answer questions or small projects, both of which force students to analyze, synthesize, evaluate and apply concepts learned throughout the course. For example, while teaching the intermediate level course, I asked students to write a small essay where they were to identify a Public Good and show how all the principles learned in class applied to it. I think paper assignments present students with the opportunity to engross themselves in the material, think critically and relationally about concepts, and ultimately consolidate the cumulative aspects of the course.

The sense of accomplishment received from being able to teach effectively, and successfully expand the student’s horizon such that they can see the relevance of the principles learned in everyday activities is inexplicable. The excitement that builds up in the classroom from a stimulation of students’ interest boosts my own passion and makes the process of imparting knowledge more enjoyable. It is an added achievement to be able to see students able to relate the goals of the course with the assignments given in class. All of that, and interaction with students through lectures, discussions, etc. in and outside the classroom makes teaching a memorable experience. Thus, I look forward to a career that involves teaching.