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Teaching Philosophy

It is often said that completing a Ph.D. program is similar to running a marathon. As both a runner and a graduate student, I can fully attest to the relevance of this analogy. Both endeavors require significant preparation and perseverance. When preparing for a race, I follow a three step process. First, I identify my goals for the race. Second, I construct a training plan that will enable me to achieve my goals. Finally, I engage myself in the training process. As a teacher, I take the marathon analogy one step further and apply it to the classroom. Interestingly, my approach towards running was derived directly from my style in the classroom.

IDENTIFY

“Know your audience.” It sounds so cliché, but I believe that this is one of the most fundamental principles an educator can follow. Having insight into the interests, backgrounds, and personalities of my students aids me in setting the tone and structure of my course. Specifically, the composition of my class helps determine the types of teaching methods, activities, and examples that will be more accessible and interesting for the students. I know from my own experiences as a student that participation in class is much easier and the class time is more enjoyable when one feels at ease. Creating an open environment is critical at the beginning of the course, and it generally starts with developing relationships within the classroom.

At the beginning of the semester, I survey my students to find out their interests and learning styles, and I try to frame my lessons and examples around things with which they can easily identify. For example, several students in my introductory class expressed an interest in Harry Potter. To illustrate the concept of budget lines, a model reflecting individual choice under scarcity, I developed an example using scenes and characters from the series. My students grasped the concept much quicker than I expected, as their knowledge of the series guided their economic analysis. Many of my students were aware that Ron was endowed with a lower income than Harry, and therefore his budget set was more limited. On homework and exams the majority of the class was able to apply the budget analysis to other examples.

CONSTRUCT

Once I know my class, I am better able to construct examples and activities that are relevant to their lives, as in the case of Harry Potter, and targeted to their learning styles. But constructing useful examples goes well beyond incorporating the interests of my students. My research experience comes into play here. Unlike those studying the hard sciences, as an economist I cannot run experiments in a controlled laboratory environment. The world is my laboratory, and, for my students, the world is their classroom.
Many students of mine are in class because it is a requirement for their major, but my goal is to show them that economics permeates beyond the classroom. It is a ubiquitous field of study that can be applied almost everywhere, from the agricultural markets to the dating market. I emphasize the importance of economics and its tools by incorporating current events in class. I often bring in news articles or government publications that illustrate how the concepts we discuss in the classroom are being used in everyday life. By the end of the semester, students often come into class with examples from their own lives. One student sent me an email describing a trip to Canada with his family. His parents were shocked by the weak dollar and my student explained to them the impact this would have on US exports to Canada.

**Engage**

As a professor, I want to be approachable to students and encourage them to share their questions and concerns. I often arrive a few minutes before class and engage in some informal discussions with the early birds regarding topics ranging from the most recent homework to the World Series game. Being approachable helps to break down barriers and facilitates student participation.

I also try to engage my students by making my class interactive. Not only do I encourage questions and comments, but I try to design activities that involve the entire class and incorporate visual, auditory, and tactile methods. For instance, to illustrate the fractional reserve banking system, I developed an example using Monopoly money. Beginning in the front row with a deposit of $1,000 and a reserve requirement of 10%, each student had the opportunity to be the banker and collectively we showed how, through lending, new spending could be generated. Before the stack of money reached the back of the room, the class grasped the concept and was making predictions of how much money would be created through our fractional reserve system.

Being in the early stages of my career, I am constantly evolving as both a scholar and an educator and continuously honing my teaching style. As an active member of the Future Professoriate Program at Syracuse University, opportunities to collaborate with my colleagues and professors regarding teaching methodologies abound. In addition, my experience as a teaching assistant has exposed me to many different courses and teaching styles. As I move forward, I will continue apply my philosophy and strive to identify interests and learning styles, construct applicable examples, and engage students through interactions both in and outside of class. And, maybe one day, I will train for a full marathon!