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Teaching Statement

As a research scholar, I conduct experiments to learn the fundamental principles of human behavior. As a teaching scholar, I apply the knowledge I gain from my research to interactions with my students. Consequently, my teaching philosophy emphasizes the following five themes: (1) always provide motivation; (2) add fun to the classroom with hand-on experiments; (3) construct a learning curve with plenty of in-class and after-class activities; (4) create grading policies that is fair and encouraging; and (5) communicate frequently and effectively with students.

Motivation is the best teacher. In the lab, I often observe that motivated players perform better. Similarly, in the classroom, a student who is ready to start their “economic adventure” is easy to bring along. Not all students, however, arrive in the classroom with the same enthusiasm. It is a teacher’s job to turn unfamiliar and abstract terms into vivid examples worth understanding, before heading into the long trek of mathematical analysis. This idea was inspired by a student in my first microeconomic principles class. The whole class remained quiet as I explained the intimidating mathematical calculation for price elasticity. Finally, one student raised his hand and asked, “But why do we need to learn this?” I paused and realized that it is not the formula that is difficult, but the logic behind it. Since then, for every topic I cover in my class, I think from the perspective of a student and ask myself first: “why do we need to learn this?” This has been very helpful to me as a teacher. By using practical examples that are closely connected to daily life or current economic debates, I have observed that my students care more about each concept I teach and are more eager to learn.

Learning economics by experimenting is fun! One of the most challenging tasks for an experimentalist is to write good experimental instructions. When a game is described in an interesting way, even the most difficult rules can become easy to grasp. To grab the attention of my students, I show them how much fun economics can be by using classroom games. These experiments turn dry concepts into hands-on experience. I have conducted experiments during most of my classes. My students embraced the “game” time! It is so much fun to learn the concept of Bertrand competition by laughing over a “poor” friend desperately reducing his/her price, only to see the “competitor” lowering it further until there is no profit to earn. It is even more hilarious—and illustrative—to demonstrate the decreasing marginal utility of candy by having a twizzler eating contest. I believe there is still untapped potential for using classroom experiments as a way to demonstrate economic concepts at all levels.

Those who follow the learning curve succeed. Laboratory observations show that successful players make early mistakes, watch and learn from their peers, and exhibit more patience towards repetition. I believe that learning economics follows similar principles. Being present in the classroom is only one of the steps on a student’s learning curve. I make it clear to them that it is only through their own effort that most learning occurs. In my teaching, I encourage the students to read the assigned chapters before class, outline them thoroughly, review the chapters and class notes after class, attempt homework assignments early, and see me whenever they are stuck. Following each of these steps carefully, in combination with the classroom experience, completes a student’s learning curve.

Incentives matter. Due to the fact that effort is costly, there is a tendency to shirk. This is a reason Nobel Laureate Vernon Smith advocated using monetary incentives in experiments. This principle holds true for my students as well; they may become distracted and not prepare for class as much as they should. To address this possibility, I incentivize them with a grading system that assigns points to everything I encourage them to do. For example, when previewing a chapter is important, I conduct a quiz to reward those who read it. Since I encourage students to do homework early, I assign a small bonus point for early submission. Similarly, to encourage advanced students to learn how to examine and discuss real economic data, I offer bonus points for those activities. Additionally, I help struggling students by offering a “participation bonus” each time they come to my office hours. My students embrace this grading system, because they know that I recognize their effort and applaud them for their progress.

It is important to know that you don’t know. Experimental results show that feedback saves people time at discovering the right thing to do. Nonetheless, in many classrooms students are left in the dark, thinking they are doing fine, until the day of the final exam. I am convinced this confusion is unnecessary, and can be avoided by providing students with prompt feedback. I always assign regular homework, and provide immediate face-to-face or written feedback on their mistakes. In doing so, I manage to give the students extra time to tackle the next difficult concept without confusion. I also benefit from student feedback. Knowing the various strength and background of my students, I am able to make the class plan more suitable for different tastes and curiosity. Socrates said that knowing one does not know is better than believing one knows when in fact one does not. With the feedback system that includes homework comments, email correspondences and effective office hours, my students and I can both break the shell of self-deception and learn something we do not know before. That, to me, is the true philosophy of learning.

Finally, I would like to say that I do not yet know what I do not know about teaching. Nonetheless, as with my research, I am open to learn by experimenting. There are many things I can learn from my future colleagues who know more about the students and their tremendous potential. There are also many resources on the internet shared by outstanding teachers of all disciplines from around the world. I will continue to learn from them too. I am looking forward to my teaching endeavor, which is certain also to become my greatest learning opportunity.