

Teaching Philosophy

My focus as a teacher is to develop certain skills (dealing with complexity and evidence-based decision-making) and mindsets (perseverance) in my students and focus less on specific knowledge acquisition. This approach allows me to better serve students across the ability distribution and to instill approaches to problem-solving, which will hopefully reach far beyond my classroom. This teaching philosophy draws heavily on my years as a high school science teacher in a low-income community, experience teaching undergraduates and graduate students, and my current research portfolio on teacher quality.

The two skills I try to integrate throughout my teaching, dealing with complexity and evidence-based decision-making, are fundamental for economists. First, I try to develop an appreciation and a strategy for dealing with complexity. Understanding nuance, the importance of assumptions and ambiguity is a crucial skill to develop in college. Economics provides a perfect forum for this because students expect there is a “right” answer in quantitative courses. However, you can demonstrate quite clearly that each answer relies on a set of assumptions, showing how altering the framing ripples through a problem to produce different results. For example, when teaching about RCTs as the “gold standard” of evidence, I show students how the effectiveness of these designs break down under certain conditions (non-random attrition, imperfect treatment compliance).

I view my students as soon to be policy-makers, business owners, lawyers, etc, and I frame the skills I teach in my classes as ones I would hope individuals going into these professions would have. Since so much theory from introductory economics does not sit on firm empirical evidence, I prefer to focus less on learning facts and information and instead on thinking about how to use economic tools to make informed decisions. The combination of focus on skills and mindsets will, ideally, have long-term influence on students irrespective of their future careers.

Encouraging perseverance is a critical aspect of my teaching philosophy. Teaching high school science gave me a firsthand look at how crippling a lack of confidence can be for students, especially women and people of color in quantitative subjects, and how this spills over into their perseverance. Similar patterns exist within the economics field. From the beginning of my class, I stress that every student can do well in the course if they work hard enough, but depending on their background, how much they will need to work will vary. Starting the first lecture with, “This class is only for X-type of students” only pushes out the underconfident, not the under-qualified. Through partner and group work in discussion section students can quickly receive feedback and see that they are not alone in being challenged by the material.

When I taught high school AP physics, before graduate school in a low-income community, I set a similarly high goal, saying that I believed every single student could pass the AP test if they kept up with my course, which would require working very hard. This was a very high bar considering most AP classes at the school had below a 20% pass rate. By providing scaffolding and additional resources for students with a less quantitative background, I try to give students both the tools and a model for what perseverance looks like in this context. In the end, the pass rate on the AP exam was over 80%, the highest pass rate in decades.