

“It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education.” - Albert Einstein

Why Economics: Do airbags cause accidents?

Learning begins when we observe the world with genuine curiosity and discover all the mysteries that surround us. Economics attempts to solve these mysteries employing methods consistent with self-interested human behavior. I lead my students on an intellectual journey through mysterious observations, discussing why economists find them mysterious and how we try to understand them. I present questions that economists have solved and others that we have not. I strive to inspire students to search for mysteries and apply economists’ tools and logic to understand them. I discuss topics I find exciting in hopes that my students share the excitement of discovering something new and the enjoyment of experiencing the acquisition of new understanding. Because, incentives matter.

Learning Environment: “Good teachers are costly, but bad teachers cost more.” - Bob Talbert

While my teaching style varies, I believe an interactive-style of teaching tends to be highly effective. I begin most classes with a question about a mystery we observe and guide the discussion toward the tools I intend to introduce that day. Even though my introductory courses follow a more formal structure, I have learned that in almost every case students respond more to interaction with an instructor and classmates than to traditional lectures. Using this interactive foundation, I constantly adjust to the students’ needs in order to encourage the development of the analytical tools and critical thinking skills necessary for economic analysis.

I strive to present course material in an analytical, a numerical, a graphical, and most importantly, a personal context. I am especially mindful of using pictures and graphs to help illustrate different concepts, as most students can then intuitively understand the concepts even if they initially have trouble understanding the analysis.

While the presentation of abstract models is important, the most powerful step is discussing the models’ multiple applications in real-world situations. It is here that the student begins to see how applications of models generate useful conclusions. We discuss controversial examples, such as illegal goods and wage inequality, to apply the concepts in alternative manners and give the students memorable applications. Students with more real world experience often bring more to the discussion and have emotional reactions to our conclusions. Without stifling students’ energies, I strive to present controversial examples in a manner that motivates students to overcome their initial emotional reaction and apply economic theory to explain the mysteries we observe. These theories must be applied over and over again until the student sees the general applicability of these principles in understanding a wide range of phenomena. My goal is to make seemingly esoteric principles practical, useful, and fun.

Learning outside the class room: Why I like trees, but not enough to throw away unused paper.

The only way to learn economics is to *do* economics. While the process of reading examples in textbooks and from lecture notes is valuable, the real learning comes through one's own efforts at solving the mysteries we see around us. For this reason, I try to assign a mixture of fundamental and challenging homework problems. This strategy allows me to challenge the more advanced students while still enabling the less able students to ascertain the basic concepts. I encourage, though I do not require, students to work cooperatively on homework assignments.

While group work may not benefit all students, these cooperative sessions increased my understanding when I was a student. When I understood a topic, I then had to clearly comprehend it in order to explain it to the group; when I was lost, other group members were able to help me grasp the concepts.

To accommodate students whose schedules may be filled with personal obligations, I have held review sessions at night and scheduled additional office hours. To keep the lines of communication open, I encourage and promptly respond to students’ email. Each of my classes has a web page which allows students access to all sorts of class information including: the syllabus, lecture notes, homework assignments, exam reviews, and exam answers.

**Assessment: "A pupil from whom nothing is ever demanded which he cannot do, never does all he can."
- J. S. Mill**

Employing a fair and honest assessment of student performance is a vital aspect of teaching. A wide grading scale, published in the course syllabus and reflecting appropriate expectations, allows students to gauge their performance at any time during the semester. Unlike a curve, this method focuses on individual achievement alone, regardless of the performance of other students. This also allows me ask a few challenging questions on each exam, to determine how far the students are able to apply the material. I will scale grades up after a course is completed if there is a compelling reason to do so. A truly meaningful sense of achievement arises from understanding new questions through logical application of the tools presented. Academic dishonesty is clearly detrimental to all students in the long run and will be punished.

Conclusion: Why a good tax is a bad tax.

The key is to get the student actively involved in the process, by continually asking the students to explore the questions step-by-step. My objective is to excite students about the world around them; enlighten students about the tools of economic analysis; illustrate the many applications of those economic tools; to provide opportunities to apply what they have learned to real world issues; and to broaden their understanding of the mysteries that surround them.