

Statement on Teaching Philosophy

Jerry Hionis

October 13, 2013

1 Teaching Philosophy and Experiences

The classes I remember most in my undergraduate years were the ones that challenged me and encouraged intuition. As an instructor, my goal is to make economics interesting and accessible to all students by showing them how the fundamental theories of economics can be used in daily life and applied to other disciplines. An average semester lasts for 14-15 weeks, and each week only grants me 150 minutes with the students. If I am successful, students will take with them not only the ideas and results of the major economic schools of thought, but the analytical skills and study habits that will help them achieve their goals.

The greatest challenge, and therefore the greatest goal, of any economics teacher is getting students to understand what economics is really about. To achieve this goal, the first day of any economic's course — even upper division — is begun defining the study of economics as *the social science that studies how individuals, firms, governments and entire societies deal with the inability to satisfy all wants and desires, known as scarcity*. This begins to breakdown many preconceived notions of what most students bring with them to the first day of class. Students are then introduced to not only the basic models of the economic field, but also the method in which economists approach these problems; that is, the problems that economists study are not unique to economics, but the approach we take in solving these problems is.

As the semester progresses, students slowly break out of their shells and start to ask questions. This is when I know that I have their attention and they are starting to associate economic theory

with applications. This unification of theory and practice is essential to successfully introducing students to the field. Outside of election years, when economics is on everyone's mind, I am elated when students come to me after class or in my office to discuss the concepts further.

Beyond economics, responsibility for one's work and actions are stressed in my classes. As a graduate student, the majority of classes I have taught have been introductory in nature and, hence, heavily populated with freshmen students. It is key then to introduce these new undergraduates on how to become better college students. I explain on the first day that cheating is never tolerated and will be punished to the fullest extent that the university or college allows. This is not said to scare students, but to show them that it is crucial to respect both the institution of education and, more importantly, their fellow students. Students of mine also learn to work independently outside of the classroom. It is easy to follow the lectures, examples and numerical problems while in class, but working on one's own is where the real learning is done. Through quantitative and qualitative homework problem sets, I help students to polish their understanding about the material while giving them ample opportunities to practice their math skills. By working through these problems, students feel a sense of accomplishment and know that they will be well prepared for the exams.

Since I need to cover a large amount of material in a short amount of time, there is always the possibility of students getting lost and overwhelmed. Before new concepts are presented, I always start each class with a simple question: "Are there any questions"? I explain to them that if there are ANY questions on previous lectures, now is the time to ask. There is no point in going deeper into the specifics if there is confusion over the basics. After questions are answered, I make it a point to review not only the main points of the previous class, but of the chapter or section in general. Following a presentation of new material, I ask students to raise their hands if they understood the concept on a scale of one through five — five being that you completely understand the concept and one being you are completely lost. This gives me an indicator of how the class as a whole is doing. Even with these measures, it is still possible for students to slip between the cracks. It is therefore essential for me to keep a track of student attendance and grades to make sure that no one falls behind.

The feedback from my students, both informally through after class questions and formally

through teaching evaluations, has been integral to the accomplishment of the above stated goals and my skills as an educator. For example, many of the students from the first classes I taught earlier in my professional career relayed to me that my homeworks and exams were too difficult and too wordy. My exams in following semesters have become much more straightforward. I have learned over the years on how to gauge class time effectively and speak at a slower pace than I do outside of class. Being fortunate enough to assist experienced professors, I learned early on to not use slides and to instead physically write out definitions and draw all graphs. This gives the lecture an aesthetic dimension of growth which allows the student to perceive the concept as a development of ideas, not just a proven fact.

Being influenced by my professors and instructors, the most rewarding moments are when current and former students tell me how much my course has peaked their interest in economics and, even more, switched majors! These are the times when I know that my enthusiasm for the study of economics has been successfully transmitted to my students.

2 Description of Courses

Beyond being a tutor in economics and a teaching assistant, my graduate career has been full of opportunities to teach a wide variety of classes. Courses that I have taught are:

Introduction to Microeconomics	Intermediate Microeconomics
Introduction to Macroeconomics	Global Economic Issues
Economics for Education Majors	Introductory Economics
Game Theory	Men, Women and the Labor Force

The most prevalent courses that I have taught, by far, are *Introduction to Microeconomics* and *Introduction to Macroeconomics*. In addition to these, Temple University has also afforded me the unique opening to teach the study of economics in more unconventional ways to reach a specific set of students. *Introduction to Economics* presents a unified view of both microeconomics and macroeconomics while *Global Economic Issues*, geared toward Social Work and Education majors, puts a specific focus on trade and the applied effects of a globalized economy. I was very proud

when I was requested and given the opportunity to be the first to create and teach a *Game Theory* course at Saint Joseph's University. It was well received by both students and faculty.

While I have taught a variety of classes (as can be seen above) and plan to constantly work to improve them, I am interested in developing new courses that will expand students' knowledge in other areas of the economics. Given my research, I intend to develop a *Economics of Conflict* course which will have students examine prevalent models found in the field, the effects that different conflicts have on the economy and cases studies from both developed and developing nations. Other courses that colleges and universities tend to offer that would be of interest to me are *Economic Development*, *History of Economic Thought* and *Economics of Political Theory*.

3 Summary of Student Feedback Forms

3.1 Temple University

At Temple University, Student Feedback Forms — known as CATE reports — are administered to students close to the end of a semester and include quantitative scores and qualitative suggestions/opinions. Students are asked ten quantitative questions (eleven for some semesters) and must answer each on a scale of one to five, where five means “strongly agree” and one means “strongly disagree”. These ten questions are:

1. The instructor clearly explained the educational objectives of this course.
2. The instructor was well organized and prepared for class.
3. The instructor was conscientious in meeting class and office hour responsibilities.
4. The instructor promoted a classroom atmosphere in which I felt free to ask questions.
5. The instructor provided useful feedback about exams, projects and assignments.
6. The instructor has applied grading policies fairly.
7. The instructor taught this course well.
8. The course content was consistent with the educational objectives of this course.
9. The course increased my ability to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments and points of view.
10. I learned a great deal in this course.

Introduction to Macroeconomics:

From teaching this class numerous times, I believe my skills of presentation and have increased over the semesters. Collecting the data of all the *Introduction to Macroeconomics* classes I have taught at Temple University from 2005 to 2011, I provide the cumulative average of all my CATE scores against the department, college and university averages.

	Hionis	Department	College	University
1. Clarity	4.6	4.0	4.3	4.3
2. Organization	4.6	4.0	4.3	4.3
3. Conscientious and Responsible	4.5	4.1	4.4	4.3
4. Classroom Atmosphere	4.6	4.1	4.4	4.3
5. Feedback	4.3	3.9	4.2	4.1
6. Grading	4.5	4.1	4.3	4.3
7. Teaching	4.6	3.8	4.3	4.2
8. Content	4.5	4.0	4.3	4.3
9. Student Benefit	4.3	3.8	4.1	4.1
10. Student Takeaway	4.3	3.8	4.2	4.2

My enthusiasm for teaching this course is constantly fueled by the responses I receive from students, such as “(He) had sincere interest in student learning”, “Wrote everything on the board in depth. Approachable, well spoken”, “Humor kept students attention. Very clear in explanation of material” and “Not having power points was helpful because he explained it as he wrote it”.

Global Economic Issues:

This class was primarily taken by education and social work majors who, while required to take an economics course, had both little interest and were generally very uncomfortable with the topics. I constructed the class as not only an introduction to both microeconomic and macroeconomic theory, but placed special emphasis on applying social and political issues, such as globalization and trade between developed and developing countries. I again provide the cumulative average of all my CATE scores from the three times I have taught this course against the department, college

and university averages.

	Hionis	Department	College	University
1. Clarity	4.3	3.9	4.3	4.3
2. Organization	4.2	4.1	4.3	4.3
3. Conscientious and Responsible	4.4	4.1	4.3	4.3
4. Classroom Atmosphere	4.4	4.1	4.3	4.3
5. Feedback	3.9	3.9	4.2	4.2
6. Grading	4.3	4.1	4.3	4.2
7. Teaching	4.3	3.8	4.2	4.2
8. Content	4.3	4.0	4.3	4.3
9. Student Benefit	3.9	3.8	4.1	4.1
10. Student Takeaway	4.1	3.8	4.0	4.1

The difficulty of teaching this course was not the presentation of the material, but to engage the students and get them interested in the topic. To do this, my standard lecture format was augmented by introducing multimedia presentations and encouraging discussions. One student stated, “Lecture is good, nice application of videos, current issues” while another said they enjoyed “his stories and life examples. Liked how he showed video clips as well. Explains the material pretty well”.

Economics for Education Majors:

Due to education majors being required to take an economics course, the economics department at Temple University created a class tailored to these students. From an instructor’s point of view, this course provides a unique challenge of presenting important economic concepts in layman’s terms without the use of the math. I chose to teach the class as a mix of microeconomic and macroeconomic concepts that would be of use for those who were seeking a career in education. Below are the CATE scores compared against the department, college and university.

	Hionis	Department	College	University
1. Clarity	5.0	4.0	4.3	4.3
2. Organization	4.8	4.2	4.4	4.4
3. Conscientious and Responsible	4.8	4.2	4.4	4.4
4. Classroom Atmosphere	4.8	4.2	4.4	4.4
5. Feedback	4.7	3.9	4.2	4.2
6. Grading	4.8	4.2	4.3	4.3
7. Teaching	4.8	3.9	4.3	4.2
8. Content	4.7	4.1	4.4	4.3
9. Student Benefit	4.5	3.9	4.2	4.1
10. Student Takeaway	4.5	3.9	4.2	4.2

When asked what aspects of my teaching were most beneficial to their learning, I was excited when one student responded that I “went over everything until we understood the concept . . . was humorous/made class interesting . . .” and another stated that I “helped with note taking and was available when questions/concerns arose”. The most common complaint that students had with the course was the lack of homework assignments given. If given the opportunity to teach such a course again, I would make sure more assignments would be available.

Intermediate Microeconomics:

A standard in any economics department is an *Intermediate Microeconomics* course. My aim for the course was two fold. I wanted to effectively introduce students to concepts much more advanced than what they might have seen in an introductory course while also making sure they could apply it to other fields that they may have been studying. Below are the CATE scores compared against the department, college and university.

	Hionis	Department	College	University
1. Clarity	4.3	4.0	4.3	4.3
2. Organization	4.5	4.1	4.4	4.3
3. Conscientious and Responsible	4.5	4.2	4.4	4.3
4. Classroom Atmosphere	4.6	4.1	4.4	4.3
5. Feedback	4.3	3.9	4.2	4.1
6. Grading	4.4	4.1	4.3	4.3
7. Teaching	4.6	3.8	4.3	4.2
8. Content	4.4	4.1	4.3	4.3
9. Student Benefit	4.2	3.8	4.1	4.1
10. Student Takeaway	4.2	3.8	4.2	4.2

As I state above, my lecture style puts emphasis on physically writing out all definitions, equations, mathematical steps and graphs on the board. This seemed to have a positive affect on the students: “Where you drew the graphs with us from scratch! There’s nothing worse than a pre-drawn graph! . . . I learned better with you going through it step by step”. Other students said they benefited by my “simplified examples” and that I was “very clear when explaining the concepts”. Most complaints revolved around access to course material; that is, better textbook, more online access and for me to record my lectures.

3.2 Saint Joseph’s University

The application and procedure of student feedback forms at Saint Joseph’s University varies from semester to semester. For the majority of classes I have taught at Saint Joseph’s University, student feedback forms are administered to students close to the end of a semester and include quantitative scores and qualitative suggestions/opinions. Unlike Temple University, these feedback forms ask over thirty different questions. To keep a level of consistency with the scores presented above, I chose to focus on ten questions asked to these students that were similar to those asked to Temple University students:

1. The requirements of the course were explained adequately.
2. The instructor seems to be well prepared.
3. The instructor seems to care about my learning.
4. Adequate opportunities are provided by the instructor for me to ask questions.
5. The instructor provides useful feedback on student progress.
6. The methods being used to evaluating my work are reasonable.
7. Overall, I rate this instructor as a good teacher.
8. The contents of the assignments contribute to my understanding of the subject.
9. The instructor's presentation often causes me to think in depth about this subject.
10. In this course, I am learning much.

Again, students are asked on a scale of one to five, where five means "strongly agree" and one means "strongly disagree".

Introduction to Microeconomics:

Like *Introduction to Macroeconomics*, teaching this class many times has increased my skill and ability to successfully relay information to students. Collecting the data from all the *Introduction to Microeconomics* classes I have taught at Saint Joseph's University from 2008 to 2012 (excluding the two semesters that used a different survey method and the one semester that did not require students to fill out any feedback form), I provide the cumulative average of all my CATE scores against the department and university averages.

	Hionis	Department	University
1. Clarity	4.3	4.4	4.3
2. Organization	4.4	4.5	4.5
3. Conscientious and Responsible	4.3	4.3	4.4
4. Classroom Atmosphere	4.4	4.5	4.5
5. Feedback	3.6	3.9	4.1
6. Grading	4.0	4.2	4.3
7. Teaching	4.6	4.4	4.4
8. Content	4.2	4.4	4.4
9. Student Benefit	4.2	4.1	4.1
10. Student Takeaway	4.2	4.2	4.2

As with *Introduction to Macroeconomics*, I am always pleased and reassured when students state that they “liked that you taught by writing on the board and not using power points or just lecturing” and the “course was really good because I learned a lot about how economics relates to daily life”. The two most common complaints were that the course needs “more homework” and that the course should have “less homework”. One could take from these statements that an instructor cannot please every student. Instead, I have used these comments as motivation to offer both mandatory and elective assignments that also vary in style; that is, both quantitative and qualitative assignments are given.

Game Theory:

While the opportunity to teach a class so close to my area of research was very rewarding, to develop it from scratch was a personal challenge. Over months of preparation, I sought a balance of introducing students to the importance of definitions, abstract equations and theorems, explaining the math behind the maximization and minimization of various functions and having them connect game theory with everyday decision making. Because it was my first time teaching the class, I know that there exists much room for improvement.

	Hionis	Department	University
1. Clarity	4.2	4.4	4.3
2. Organization	4.2	4.4	4.4
3. Conscientious and Responsible	4.3	4.3	4.4
4. Classroom Atmosphere	4.5	4.4	4.5
5. Feedback	3.5	3.8	4.0
6. Grading	4.4	4.3	4.2
7. Teaching	4.4	4.4	4.3
8. Content	3.9	4.3	4.3
9. Student Benefit	4.1	4.1	4.1
10. Student Takeaway	4.1	4.2	4.2

Given the complex nature of the material, it was reassuring to hear students say that I had “made a difficult topic very understandable. Very clear and likable” and that I presented “a lot of new material. Interesting”. From student comments, I became aware that many did not find the text I assigned for the class helpful and felt very limited in a 50 minute class period. I have since revised this course with a new textbook, more applied readings and to only schedule the class for a 75 minute or longer time slot.