MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY/METHODOLOGY[1,2,3]

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The reader became the book; and summer night
Was like the conscious being of the book.
— Wallace Stevens

As a teacher, seeking this kind of immersion on the part of the students in one's course may seem utopian, even foolhardy, but it is the constant striving towards coming closer to this goal that can make both the learning and the teaching experience more rewarding. Below, I briefly sketch *some* of my endeavors in this regard.

1. Thinking Like an Economist

While the students in the *Global* classes have had at least one economics course, many have little memory or are not aware of the economist's way of thinking. Hence I devote some time at the beginning of the course towards demonstrating how this way of thinking can help us understand such diverse phenomena as:
1) Why are there so many con-men in Florida?
2) Why are rappers (rather than pop-stars) less likely to get 'punk'd' on the MTV show: PUNK'D? [Students address this question as an assignment]
Once it becomes apparent as to how far-reaching the cost-benefit approach to decision making can be in helping us explain social phenomena (especially those that belong to students' experiential realm), then it transforms what might have started out as a desultory association with the course into something more purposeful (or in terms of learning theory, it positively influences one's affective domain). Furthermore, since the different issues in the course will be addressed in terms of the economist's way of thinking it is important that students obtain a firm grasp of it at the outset.

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[1] My approach to teaching has been shaped significantly by a six-course (optional) graduate seminar sequence on teaching effectiveness that I took while I was at the University of Cincinnati.

[2] In what follows, I describe this broad philosophy within the specific contexts of my Global and International Trade courses – my 'stock' courses at USI. It, however, underlies the teaching of all my courses. Further, comments by students appearing in this tract have been drawn from sections of these courses taught over the various semesters.

[3] This is a **'work-in-progress.'**

2. Topic Coverage

We know from experience (and educational researchers confirm this) that if one is to obtain more than just a nodding acquaintance with an idea, a concept or an issue, then one must be allowed to chew and mull over it. For an idea or a concept to sink in, if one is to get under its skin, if one is to obtain a commanding grasp of it, one must not only see it being applied a few times (by the instructor) but also have a number of opportunities to do so oneself. Thus I prefer to cover fewer topics, making room for a firm and lasting grasp of each than to take students on a whirlwind tour of a great many topics which inevitably results in their obtaining a very flimsy and ephemeral understanding of each.

3. Introducing a New Topic

Each new topic is introduced with either an anecdote or a real world event/issue. This provides a context for the information that will be subsequently presented and hence makes for a more meaningful organization of the new material in the minds of students (or in terms of learning theory, it makes for a more effective encoding of the new information).

Further, at the outset, I also address the question of why it is important to obtain an understanding of the issue under consideration. In the Global class, for instance, on the question of why AIDS is an economic issue, I offer the example of the country of the Botswana which was a shining star in the African continent in terms of its relative economic prosperity but now that it finds itself in the vice-like grip of the AIDS virus it has lost all its shine. This example shows that the AIDS virus can not only choke off economic growth but also result in a retreat of economic development. To take an example from the International Trade class, on the question of the importance of the specific factors model it is pointed out that this model, among other things, can help explain quite succinctly as to why trade policy regarding some sectors of the economy continue to take on a highly protectionist form.

This emphasis on drumming out the 'real-world' links of a topic at the very outset speaks to students' concern about 'relevance' and helps engender interest in the topic to be discussed.

4. Introducing and Teaching a New Concept

As I introduce and develop a new concept I prefer to have students play an active role rather than look on passively as I unfurl and explain a fully 'finished' example. One instance of this, in the International Trade class, is in the development of the notion of an autarky equilibrium. Instead of me taking on

the entire task of locating the equilibrium and providing the rationale for it, I let the students accomplish it. While locating the equilibrium usually poses no problems, offering a rationale for it proves to be quite daunting. Here's where I intervene and prod their thought processes by asking them to draw an analogy with the determination of the optimal consumption bundle from consumer theory. Eventually, they do taste success. An advantage of this approach is that it enables students to see the connection between seemingly disparate areas in economics and in doing so sharpens their overall understanding of the subject.

Importantly, a notion or a concept that is developed through such student involvement is less likely to appear as something arcane or 'other-worldly' and more likely to be something a student can readily embrace and relate to. Further, this kind of involvement by baring the process by which a concept comes into being in a 'personal' sort of way not only makes for easy apprehension of it but also aids in its retention (based on the social-constructivist model of learning).[4]

Now, the 'baring-process', having been primarily driven by students, builds their confidence in their ability to conquer the material of the course which, in turn, makes for easier learning of it (following the self-efficacy learning-model).

5. The Structure of a Lecture

At the end of each lecture students are called upon to summarize the main points. Besides making for more student involvement, this helps in reinforcing students' understanding of the material just presented and thus aids in its retention. At the beginning of each lecture we do a quick recap of the material presented in the previous lecture. As the lecture progresses this will help students build a link between the information being presented and the 'old' information. Creating such a connection, educational psychologists point out, leads to better encoding of the overall subject material.

While I ask many different kinds of questions during the course of a lecture, let me mention three: one type is intended to help in motivating a new issue, another in developing a new concept and yet another as a check on whether students are grasping the material being discussed. Students are also encouraged to ask any of kind of question that they might have on the subject material. On occasion, student-initiated questions are thrown open to the class and every attempt is made to 'coax' out the answer from within the student body. One objective of this is to give students practice in careful and rigorous

[4] For more on this model of learning and other learning-models that this document makes reference to, see Stage, Frances K., Patricia A. Muller, Jillian Kinzie, and Ada Simmons (1998), "Creating Learning Centered Classrooms: What Does Learning Theory Have to Say?" *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, Vol. 26., No. 4., Washington, D.C.; George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

thinking. This kind of two-way talk syncopates the lecture in a way that helps sustain student interest and concentration over an extended period of time.[5]

Despite one's best efforts to encourage students to raise any questions they might have (on the subject material) during class, there are some who are hesitant to do so. Hence, I keep aside about 15 - 30 minutes after class where students can meet with me to have their questions addressed. This is certainly advantageous to students as they can have their problems tackled right away when the material is fresh in their minds rather than having to wait to bring them up during office hours.

6. Designing Homeworks/Exams

Questions appearing on homeworks and exams are designed with the objective of testing a student's ability to *apply* the tools that she/he has acquired in the course to analyzing a problem that has some real-world connection in the sense that it is either inspired by a real-world event/phenomenon or that its context could potentially find reflection in the real world. The purpose of embedding such a connection in a problem is that students, on analyzing it, can more readily appreciate the 'usefulness' of the tools they have acquired and this serves to strengthen their interest in the course leading, in turn, to more effective learning.

The emphasis on building a real-world connection whether it be in the lectures or in the exams/assignments seems to have been well received by the students, as the open-ended evaluations indicate. Here are some comments:

(i) "[What I like most about the course were] the topics and the way he tied them into everyday life."

(ii) "I enjoyed the fact that the topics had to deal with situations in our lives and things we will have to look out for in the future. Also many of the topics were current so I could turn on the T.V and keep up."

(iii) "[What I liked most about course was that] we covered many different current & past topics into the lecture & used real life scenario examples for certain topics."

(iv) On the question of how the instructor contributed to the learning of the course material, this was one comment: "He applied it to all everyday situations."

(v) On the question of how the instructor contributed to the learning of the course material, this was one comment: "He did a good job by relating topics to things that concern us."

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[5] Hansen and Salemi ("Improving Classroom discussion in Economics Courses," in Saunders, Phillip and W.B. Walstad (1990), eds, *The Principles of Economics Course: A Handbook for Instructors*, New York: McGraw Hill, 96-110) define two-way talk as talk between the teacher and a student or talk between students themselves.

(vi) On the question of how the instructor contributed to the learning of the course material, this was one comment: "Examples from the real world."

While it is quite obvious that the bias towards 'application' questions rather than questions simply involving recall stems from the expectation that students, on completion of the course, should be able to apply the tools they have learned to obtain a firmer understanding of social phenomena, it is less apparent that answering such (application) questions, in fact, leads students to "process the content of the instruction more thoroughly" (see, Watts and Anderson; 1971).[6]

7. In-Class Assignments

In-class assignments form an integral part of my courses. They fall into four categories:

(i) Assignments in the first category involve working out (largely, mechanically) simple problems. Here's an example of a problem that might appear on these assignments: calculate the level of the bribe and the bribery rate for the different imported quantities? Questions such as this, in addition to giving students practice in the mechanics of solving a problem, serve to reinforce their understanding of a concept that has just been covered in class.

(ii) Assignments in the second category involve, in addition to some computation, the interpretation/analysis of its results. A sample problem, here, would be as follows. Calculate the marginal product of labor and the value of the marginal product of labor for the various numbers of workers? Now, if the wage rate = $10, how many workers should the firm hire (under perfect competition)? Why? Can you now determine the rule for hiring the optimal number of workers? Draw the firm's demand curve for labor.

(iii) The third category consists of assignments that involve answering a series of questions on a newspaper clipping or a magazine article. This kind of exercise, since it entails the application of the tools acquired in the course, serves, once again, to bring to the fore the 'relevance' and 'usefulness' of these tools.

On some assignments in the second and third categories (particularly, the relatively more challenging ones) students are allowed to work in groups. There are, of course, numerous benefits of such cooperative activity. Let me mention just a couple: it gives one the opportunity to review the course material with another student and this helps in discovering and filling any gaps one might have in one's class-notes; it also gives a student the opportunity to be exposed to another's thought process and this is more likely than not to have a salutary effect on learning.

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[6] Watts, Graeme H., and R.C. Anderson (1971), "Effects of Three Types of Inserted Questions on Learning from Prose," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 62, 387-394.

(iv) The fourth category consists of assignments that involve having a class debate or discussion on some economic issue. These may be formally or informally structured. Two informally structured class discussions we had in the International Trade class were on the following topics:
a) Product labeling standards and the incentive for quality improvement.
b) How is it that a small group of people can get a trade policy measure passed through Congress that will end up negatively affecting a majority of the population?

Such class discussions allow 'two-way talk' to take on its fullest form; there is 'talk' among students and between the teacher and the students. It is well known (in terms of the social-constructivist learning-model) that this kind of 'two-way talk' aids in the development of higher order cognitive skills.

Here's one student-comment about In-class Assignments: "The in-class exercize and lecture have been very effective because the proffessor builds on and relates different topics of the course."

8. The Student Note

Another kind of assignment, which is not 'in-class' but 'out-of-class', is made use of in the *Global* course. This takes the form of a note that a student writes, either individually or as part of a group. Further, students present and discuss their Notes in class. The objective of the Note is to give students the opportunity to address an aspect or dimension of an issue that they find interesting but which is not tackled in class. The presentation and discussion of the Notes exposes the students to a wide spectrum of dimensions of an issue resulting in a broader understanding of it. The instrument of the Note as learning mechanism, then, is inspired by the social constructivist learning-model.

Moreover, the writing of the Note not only involves the application of already acquired 'technical' tools (yielding the 'content-processing benefit' alluded to earlier) but also, frequently, the procurement of new tools which may sharpen the lens through which an earlier-addressed (and a yet-to-be-addressed) issue was (is) apprehended.

9. Grading Philosophy

In grading the responses of students to exam or homework questions, I look for the extent to which students can marshall they knowledge they have acquired in the course so as argue their case or position as forcefully or as convincingly as possible - that is, whether or not all steps in the logical sequence that underlies the reasoning process have been accorded due attention. This skill - that is, the ability to present one's case as convincingly as possible - is valued

not only in the economics profession but by most professions and hence I seek to nurture it in my students.

10. Discussion of Graded Work

While returning the graded homeworks/exams/assignments, I offer a congratulatory word to those who have done well and encourage those who are struggling to meet with me after class so that we can address the problem areas. Making this effort shows the students that the teacher is genuinely concerned about their performance and consequently acts as a strong motivational device.
After returning the homeworks/exam/assignments we work out the answers (usually towards the end of class), and this is a collaborative enterprise between the students and me. This exercise usually helps many students discover more effective ways of approaching and tackling a problem. Further, for a student, witnessing how a peer successfully tackled a problem is likely to have some 'emulative-effect' which bodes well for the learning process (as maintained by the self-efficacy learning-model).

11. Enthusiasm for Teaching

Finally, I try to bring a high level of energy and enthusiasm to each lecture. Educational psychologists maintain that an instructor who is demonstrably passionate about the material he/she is presenting can go a long way in cultivating and nurturing a student's interest in the subject. Some favorable comments in this regard include:
(i) On the question of how the instructor contributed to the learning of the course material, this was one comment: "He was very enthusiastic..."
(ii) "[What I liked most about the course was that] the professor was very animated and made the subjects interesting."

Just before the start of a semester and during the course of it, I actively try and think of ways in which a greater number of students can be brought closer to experiencing the kind of immersion that Stevens alludes to, although there is little or no promise of success.