

Teaching Statement

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After many years as a student, I have had ample experiences with teachers and classes that I found thoroughly engaging, and ones where I was just waiting for the hour to pass. I know my preferred notes layout, presentation style, and organizational methods. But one of the most important ideas I needed to understand in the transition from student to teacher is that not everyone is like me. The standards to engage a student either in or considering graduate school are very different than those for a future investment banker or a computer science major knocking out an elective.

Economics coursework can play a crucial role in shaping student decision making processes. But students, even at the highest level, are not going to use or remember everything they learned. My goal as a teacher is not to ensure that they remember every rigorous definition, but to understand why it is possible, for example, for two rational people to reach an objectively worse outcome. And if in ten years' time the student remembers and touts their knowledge of specific terminology of the Prisoner's dilemma to their friends, family, or coworkers, more power to them.

The greatest roadblock to effectively teaching this material is a blank face. Even without verbal communication, if I see a smile or nod, I have affirmation that they are understanding, or at least pretending to. With a frown or a yawn, I know that I am losing them. Either way, I can continue or adjust what I am doing based on this visual feedback. A blank face, however, is passive and uninformative. The student could understand everything or nothing at all. But they are not engaged.

One of the few positive consequences of teaching through covid was learning how to overcome this barrier to the extreme. Even a blank face is preferable to a black screen with a name on Zoom, and an active face is near indiscernible when a mask is over it. The obvious way to boost engagement is to ask questions to the class, but this is not always successful and often leads to long silences. One way I curb this issue is to sprinkle in ample easy questions as confidence boosters as I walk the students through problems. There is no correct answer scoreboard, but students are more likely to attempt to answer more challenging questions when they have already displayed some level of baseline proficiency. In a game theory course, I can always add a question with no wrong answer: "What would you do?" Even if the student answer is not deemed perfectly rational in the game we are solving, it gives an example of how a real individual may think, which itself can become a lesson. These types of questions allow for a fluid back and forth between me and the students.

Time permitting, I prime this process even earlier. I often start a class for undergraduates with a question of the day: favorite ice cream flavors, what animal they would want to be, etc. Part of that is because I genuinely enjoy hearing some of the answers, but more importantly it can help students feel more comfortable in the classroom. It is usually awkward at first, but that is the point. Otherwise reserved students have a low stakes opportunity to make their voice known, to "participate" without fear of revealing lack of knowledge. And this seemingly translates to the actual course content. Students are more engaged; they ask and respond to more questions and more readily reveal when they are confused. Obviously, this is not a perfect experiment. Perhaps it is all coincidental or I suffer from confirmation bias. What I can say for certain is that my personal enjoyment for teaching and hearing from them greatly increases, and I truly believe that

the students can feel that. This is evidenced by several comments in my evaluations highlighting a fun or comfortable environment.

Finally, I find it beneficial to have clear guidelines on logistics and grading rubrics. One of the most challenging, but regularly occurring, scenarios is an active student who underperforms on an assignment or exam relative to their effort in the course. It is important to be understanding and accommodating to students' situations, but not at the expense of equity and fairness. Students should be evaluated on a level playing field. There will still be cases where lines are blurred, as not all rubrics are perfect. However, having these clear guidelines simplifies most of these situations. This allows me to continue to host a friendly, open environment without falling victim to pitfalls of favoritism or pity.