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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

*“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.
Teach him how to fish and you feed him
for a lifetime” Lao Tzu*

Upon completing my undergraduate studies, I began teaching Principles of Business and Economics at a secondary school in the small Eastern Caribbean nation of St Vincent and the Grenadines, my native country. This was my first teaching experience and not having the faintest idea about how to approach the classroom, how to deliver content, and how to assess students, I rushed to the nearest bookstore to purchase a book on how to teach. Teaching high school students is different from teaching college students, but the ideas I absorbed, the real time application of newly acquired teaching methods on a daily basis, and the subsequent successes and failures I encountered, helped spawn an enduring view and an approach to teaching that I maintain to this day.

I believe there are three essential attributes of good and effective teaching. These are (1) organization, (2) competence, and (3) enthusiasm. Organization in teaching starts with the course outline and the lesson plan. An instructor must not only set clear and concise objectives but must communicate these objectives to students. I believe my objective as a teacher of economics is first and foremost to develop and enhance critical thinking skills. Economics is not just a set of theories and facts; it is a way of thinking, an approach to solving problems that if mastered will serve the student a lifetime. I often challenge my students to use what they know to determine what they don't know because learning is not just about becoming familiar with new material; it is also about learning how to learn. Lao Tzu's famous proverb quoted above is my mantra and by following the spirit of this tenet, we prepare our students to function in an information economy.

Not only do I tell students what to expect from me and the course, I also convey what their responsibilities are and what I expect from them. Students must in some way participate in their own learning. I believe that interactive learning is useful and effective primarily because it is student centered. As such, I expect and encourage students to actively participate in discussions, active learning exercises, group work, and presentations. This approach allows the student to take ownership of the education product and help to shape and mould it in a way that is reflective of their own cognitive style. Students are more likely to ask themselves questions, challenge assertions made by their classmates, and put forward a good effort in front of their peers. Essentially students learn from themselves and this can only be beneficial. A teacher sermon might give you nodding heads but student friendly participatory learning environments are far more effective and provide instantaneous feedback with which to evaluate and assess student understanding.

Another aspect of organization involves the sequencing of content both throughout a semester and within a lecture. Haphazard delivery of content can lead to confusion. Organization of the sequence of material is of paramount importance and it is not always consistent with text book presentations. In lecture, I have often found that the use of an “organizer” on the blackboard to set forth the objectives and structure of the class is a tool that students love. It’s a way to bring the lesson plan to life. Here is an example of an actual organizer I have used to teach international trade:

By the end of this class you should be able to:-

- (a) *State the basic assumptions of the Ricardian Model;*
- (b) *Define and explain Ricardian Comparative Advantage;*
- (c) *Illustrate gains from trade using a production possibilities frontier.*

The second attribute of good and effective teaching is competence. At the very core of a teaching relationship is a knowledge differential. An instructor cannot know everything but they should have some working knowledge of course content otherwise they will not command the respect of their students. No matter how many learning theories and teaching methodologies a professor knows, if they are not au fait with the course content, they cannot achieve their objectives and deliver on the university’s promise of a sound and fulfilling education. A part of being competent is having the intellectual maturity and integrity to acknowledge when you are wrong or when you don’t know something. This is ok provided the instructor returns to the classroom and addresses the problem. However, persistent inability to respond to student questions about subject material in my view is not only a dereliction of duty but is a waste of time and resources. In my experience, students, especially students being introduced to economics have a way of asking piercing questions that trained economists rarely think about. I spend time preparing and ensuring that I have a thorough understanding of the subject matter, so that I can command the respect of my students and address questions they may have in a simple and sufficient manner.

The ability to make decisions in teaching is crucial. Generally when making decisions about course content, I prioritize in the following manner. First, I decide what is necessary to introduce and orient students to the subject matter; sometimes this involves discussing a set of stylized facts, providing a historical account, providing a definition or some combination of these. In international economics this usually means defining what international economics is, discussing global trends in merchandise and service trade, and then giving some historical account of the mercantilist system of trade and the set of beliefs encapsulated therein. There is always a trade-off when choosing material to teach, but I favor topics that give students enduring skills. If I have to choose between teaching the history of U.S Commercial Policies or teaching students about Effective Rates of Protection, I would likely choose the latter because I believe I have greater value added by so doing, and the latter topic would likely force the student to stretch their minds a little bit, which fits into the objective of fostering critical thinking. Of course there is no hard and fast rule and it depends on the particular set of circumstances and group of students, but generally I prioritize in favor of analytics as opposed to descriptive topics. In most subjects there are cluster of topics or workhorse models that are

considered fundamental. Teaching international economics without discussing the theory of comparative advantage and the Heckscher-Ohlin theories of trade would not make much sense.

As I mentioned earlier when deciding on methods I prefer interactive and collaborative approaches. Active learning exercises are very effective but also very time consuming, so the use of these exercises for me depends on time constraints.

Finally, not being far removed from being a student myself I know that an instructor's enthusiasm and passion for subject matter can inspire and motivate students to learn. Teaching is more than the uninspired conveyance of facts; it's about motivating the subject matter and making it interesting. Enthusiasm and passion coming from the instructor is infectious and often makes the learning environment lively and vibrant. In my experience it can often make the difference between students nodding off in class and actually learning something, especially at 8 o' clock in the morning in the middle of winter.

Above all the rewards of teaching are intangible because in some way if you're effective, you're touching the life of a student, you're making a contribution not only to a person but to society. It's always nice when a past student tells how your course or career advice helped them in some way. Fortunately, most of my students from my experimental days at that high school in St Vincent and the Grenadines are successes in their own right. I can't take the credit but I can claim no damage. I can live with that!