

Coaching Economics

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1 Introduction

There is a story, perhaps a fable, that provides the motivation for this article. During an England football team training session, David Beckham was practising his free-kicks. At one point, he was struggling to score on a consistent basis. Glenn Hoddle, then the England manager, came over and told Beckham that he should step aside and let him show him how to do it. He then proceeded to take the same free kick repeatedly with much greater success. By all popular accounts, this simply wasted some of Beckham's training time, and all it taught him was that Hoddle could take good free kicks.

And yet while most people accept that trying to teach someone a sport simply by letting them watch someone else who is able to do it is not the most effective way of teaching (if we could all get good simply by watching, then pubs up and down the UK would be filled with top stars!), it is something that is done quite regularly in the teaching of economics. Noticing this, I decided to examine the lessons that can be drawn from the coaching of sports to aid the teaching of economics.¹

2 A Good Coaching Session

A basketball coach, trying to teach aspiring players to shoot the ball, will generally break the action of shooting down into component parts, get students involved and constantly observe what they are doing and make corrections to what they do. The players will be constantly encouraged to follow the drills

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¹Of course, the teaching of economics, when done well, provides a number of lessons for coaches, but these are a for another article!

correctly and constantly reminded of what the bigger picture is and why all the parts are needed to be a successful player.

The key elements of a good coaching session are:

1. Encouragement of an active learning environment;
2. Constant reminders of the big picture;
3. Fixing common faults;
4. Constant encouragement.

In teaching quantitative economics subjects, where the classes are problem-set rather than discussion based, I believe that we should follow a similar path:

1. Students of economics do not need to be convinced that you, as the teacher, are able to do the questions. Therefore, simply giving them the answer as you would do it, without consideration of which bits they find easy and which bits they find hard will simply lead to them losing motivation and interest in your class. This approach amounts to providing them with material that they can work on after class - would it not be more efficient to simply E-mail them the answer if they are going to have to try to work out what is going on even after they attend the class?

By constantly getting feedback on whether the students have followed the material, by getting them to work through the problems themselves (even during the class) and by forcing them to take an active role in the classes, students will derive more learning from your classes, and over time, as they see that their knowledge base is increasing, will grow in motivation and participation.

2. It is very easy to get lost in the detail of problem sets, and the detail is obviously important, but the details should be taught within a clear framework for the overall question, and where the overall question fits in terms of the entire course. For example, in my MSc macro classes, the problem sets can often involve some complicated mathematics but the questions we are answering are often highly important within the overall field of economics (tax smoothing, consumption CAPM, time inconsistency). In order to keep the students focused on why we are interested in this, and to get them motivated to consider which of the assumptions we use make sense, they need to understand the big picture.

To do this, I always keep a list of objectives on the board for each class. At the start, I discuss each of the steps we will do and how they add up to a really interesting result. As we go through parts of the problem set, I will tick off the completed sections (which has usually involved some detailed algebra or optimisation), while also discussing what have completed so far, and what is left to do. At the end, we discuss the results we got, how they came together and try to identify the key assumptions that led us to the conclusion.

3. I find that my students have often made mistakes with the questions that I did not consider, but that when one student makes a mistake, it is often made by others too. To find out what mistakes students have made, it is necessary to observe their attempts, ask them to provide the next steps, check

their understanding through class participation, and regularly receive feedback on anything you have written on the board. Over years of teaching you can learn the common problems and ensure you address them, but early on a participatory, two-way environment makes identification of their errors much easier; which in turn makes them more interested and motivated in your class.

4. The final aspect that I think many class teachers ignore too often is the role of encouragement. There are many ways to encourage students; the direct approach of congratulating them when they are correct, or even just for trying in class. But also the indirect approaches such as taking an interest in them, and what they want to do and then trying to highlight how what they learn might help them and give them an advantage. Interested students create the environment of participation, and the participation allows you to identify faults and correct them and so make the classes more useful, while teaching them the big picture as well as the detail increases their interest and further encourages participation and interaction with you.

3 Conclusion

I believe that students lose interest in classes where the teaching is simply a display of the answer, rather than a teaching of understanding. The problem is that once students start to lose interest, it becomes more difficult to get them motivated and interested and so it is harder to impart understanding (especially if they simply stop attending). We have all at some time faced a class of silent students who stare down at their page - if our reaction to this situation is simply to turn and give them the answer that we prepared, we have entered a negative cycle which ends in little fulfillment for either teacher or student. On the other hand, if we can get them interested and participating, and aim to teach them how to answer questions rather than what the answer is, then we can enter a positive cycle of students appreciating you and you looking forward to teaching them.