

Reflections on my teaching¹

By Dr. Michael McMahon

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Warwick.

Working in one of the top UK Economics Departments (ranked 3rd in UK), and being at the start of my probationary period, I recognise that my research is vital to the success of my academic career. Nonetheless, I am a passionate teacher and believe that my teaching activities complement my research activities. I have taught courses at various levels (undergraduate, MSc, MBA and PhD) for a number of institutions (Warwick, LSE, University of Chicago and NYU).

However, my first experience of teaching came in the form of sports coaching. I have coached basketball since I was 16, and hold both basketball and FA Football coaching qualifications. Though this experience may seem unimportant, I believe that the philosophy underlying the teaching of economics and that underlying the coaching of sports are quite similar.

Imagine a sports coach intent on imparting a particular skill to his player(s), whatever their age or skill. Now imagine that this coach simply gets the players to sit in front of him while the coach proceeds to demonstrate the skill (s)he hopes to pass on. While some, the best and most eager players, will pick up some technique from this display, for most, this will largely be a waste of time simply demonstrating that the coach has the skill that they wish to acquire. Most people accept that merely watching someone else do a sport is not the most effective way of teaching it (if it was, then UK pubs would be filled with top sports stars!). And yet this is something that is done quite regularly in the teaching of economics (and, I suspect, other subjects).

The key elements of a good coaching session are: breaking the skill down into manageable and component parts; encouraging an active learning environment; constant reminders of the big picture; fixing common faults; and continual encouragement. It is also useful to remind the players of the transferable skills sets that they are developing; they may be doing work on shooting, but it will also help their fitness and defensive skills.

I believe that lecturers should, similarly, aim to follow this blueprint for a successful session. My teaching philosophy can thus be summarised by the idea of “Coaching Economics”.

Adding Value

¹ This is slightly self-indulgent reflection on my teaching style and philosophy. Some of this material builds on two earlier case studies available at the Economics Network (“[Coaching Economics](#)” and “[Employability, Transferable Skills and Student Motivation](#)”). I am grateful to the Economics Network for the hard work it does in promoting more effective teaching of 3rd level economics in the UK (and abroad).

When our students begin a new course, they do not need to be convinced that I, as the lecturer, understand and can cover the material; they take this as given. Therefore simply giving them the answer the way I would do it, without considering which aspects they might find hard, without discussion of why the approach is relevant, and without linking it to the remainder of their studies, adds little value. In such situations students will simply lose motivation and interest in the class.

Like sports coaches, lecturers need to add value in every session. They need to provide something beyond what the student can get alone with a book or a set of notes. In the absence of teaching understanding and an engagement with the issues, students lose interest.

When teaching, I try to provide a clear structure and the big picture of the course/subject. I try to be clear in delivery of each step of the analysis. I engage constantly with my students but I try to make the environment a fun and interesting one, and one in which it is ok to make mistakes. I emphasise all the great things, in addition to the material, that I am trying to help them with. I am constantly trying to make sure that the students are following, and I make sure there is ample opportunity to rejoin the lecture if a student has drifted off. All of these contribute greatly to student motivation.

Motivation is the key to the successful coaching session, as well as to the successful economics session. Football pundits talk of football managers “losing the dressing room”; that is, their players no longer believe in the tactics and methods of the coach and therefore lose motivation which results in poor performances. A similar concept, “losing the lecture hall”, is the cause of many lecturers poor standing amongst the student body but the lecturer reaction is typically just to curse the need to teach and to wish that students would stop moaning.

The basic premise is simple; motivated students make the teaching experience more enjoyable for the teacher, and this generates more teaching enthusiasm which rubs off on student motivation. We enter a positive cycle of students appreciating you and you looking forward to teaching them. This is how I believe most people start their teaching career.

No one wants to be a poor teacher; unfortunately, many do not start well. 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 to adopt a more defensive "give them the answer and get out" approach, then this reduces student involvement and motivation even further. We have entered a negative cycle which ends in little fulfilment for either teacher or student.

Transferable Skills

To understand student motivation, one needs to understand why students are in your class. Of course, sometimes that they have to be (degree regulations), but then the question is why are they in the degree or what are they hoping to get out of it. For most students, your class is just a stepping stone to some bigger goal of employment.

The following quote, a typical example taken from the Economics Network's Employers Survey, shows what it takes to get the best graduate jobs:

"Employability says they turn up smart, on time, their soft skills are good, they can listen, diagnose... have an ability to think."

Therefore, through their courses students need to develop transferable skills that make getting a good job more attainable. These include:

- interview skills and the ability to "think on your feet";
- how to write well;
- confidence with presentations;
- critical analysis;
- Group work skills.

This list is not exhaustive, nor will it apply to all students, but my experience is that, unfortunately, students don't always see the benefit of these transferable skills on their own. As well as a clear understanding of what it takes to succeed in the course, students also need to be made aware of the transferable skills that they will acquire on the course.

These skills are inherently linked to issues of motivation and participation; students must put in the effort to gain them. Here the lecturer can use positive reinforcement for trying to get to the correct answer, and encourage a risk-free environment where failure is refusing to try. It is also important to ensure participation of all students; it is too easy for teachers to fall into the trap of always taking answers from the best student. During a recent teaching observation I conducted, the seminar leader fell into this trap of letting students "free-ride" on one or two students who provided all the answers.

Helping students to develop communication skills, either written, oral or presentational, is another important element of the teaching experience; university presents a risk-free environment to learn important transferable skills in this regard. Especially where the assignment is formative, our main teaching tools are feedback and encouragement.

In an increasingly global learning environment, oral communication is often between two non-native English speakers (and even one, let alone two, non-native speaker presents challenges to two-way communication). I believe that we, as teachers, can do a lot more to make the learning environment conducive to the education and learning of those coming from non-English backgrounds. The words we use, how we present, and especially how we make use of the whiteboard can all facilitate an easier time for both student and teacher.

While I enjoy the opportunity to mould the minds' of students (how I "spin" the subject can determine how my students think about economics and policy), teaching also benefits my research through the development of my own transferable skills.

Teaching undergraduates, for example, forces you to simplify the subject matter and truly understand the material; this helps me to identify gaps in the existing models and stimulates research ideas. Through teaching, I develop my abilities to present and to think on my feet. I often present my own developing research to PhD and MSc students; who, because they are in a risk-free environment, are happy to ask tough questions that force me to think hard about the implicit assumptions in my work. As Greg Mankiw (Harvard Professor of Economics) puts it, “imparting knowledge and creating knowledge are complementary activities”.

My Success to Date

I believe that I, through careful thought about my desired teaching outcomes, careful design of the curriculum and carefully targeted assessment methods, implement my teaching philosophy effectively. I have been awarded numerous teaching prizes (including from LSE and Chicago GSB) and have received some very favourable feedback from students; comments such as “He is the best class teacher I have had at any university, ever. Fantastic.”, while very nice for my own ego, also indicate that my teaching methods are comparatively well received.

Part of my philosophy is that by being interesting, fun and popular, students will remain more motivated and so are likely to learn more. The following comment suggests that a fun and interesting environment is perceived as a better learning environment by my students:

“Michael McMahon is probably the most interesting lecturer in the department and makes every lecture extremely fun to attend and very interesting even if the content in the lecture is apparently boring.”

A reviewer from the University of Warwick’s Learning and Development Centre, after observing a lecture of mine, noted the interactive and fun environment that I create:

“There is plenty of interaction between the lecturer and pupils during lectures, and the material is taught in a light-hearted and fun way to keep everyone interested.”

A peer reviewer, a lawyer, noted that the fun was introduced with clear educational outcomes in mind:

“The lecturer interacted well with the students and had clearly built up a good rapport with them.... The session was relaxed... participation was encouraged. In particular, the lecturer asked volunteers to participate in a game for which students were rewarded with prizes. This was fun and bore on a specific learning outcome about how expectations are generated.”

Whilst I am very proud of these favourable comments, I am even more proud of comments which indicate the effectiveness of my style:

“He teaches at the right pace and explains mathematical steps clearly. He also usually stresses the economic intuition behind the maths and how some concepts are

related to previous topics. This kind of teaching method is especially helpful in my understanding the subject.”

I do not believe that the teaching approaches which contribute to these successes are high cost, but rather are a set of simple principles which anyone can apply in their teaching.

Low-Cost, High-Value-Added Teaching Methods

There is a wonderful quote from Bertrand Russell:

“More important than the curriculum is the question of the methods of teaching and the spirit in which the teaching is given.”

While this view aligns closely with my own emphasis on the learning environment, my concern is that people wrongly interpret the quote as meaning that the only way to teach effectively is to introduce new and innovative teaching practices. While I am always very excited by innovative new ways to support learning, my worry is that the time and resource costs of these approaches mean that they are never widely adopted by other lecturers.

For example, I know of some lecturers who make extensive use of audience response gadgets to “ask the audience” in real time and display the results quickly. Others have completely redesigned their course emphasising problem-based learning (PBL). These wonderful tools involve significant fixed costs. Too much emphasis on these high-cost methods only serve to push the weakest lecturers away from Teaching and Learning Centres, and those who aim to improve the quality of teaching.

My focus is actually on relatively simple, easy to implement teaching methods which can be used by new or more experienced colleagues. I shall briefly mention a few of these low-cost tips here:

I maintain a list of objectives for each session on the board, which I tick off as we go. This serves as a simple big picture guide through the material that really helps keep the students thinking on track and lets them see why each step is important.

I constantly engage with my students in lectures and classes to get feedback on student understanding. Rather than simply asking them, I get them to work through the problems themselves or in small groups (even during the lecture). By forcing them to take an active role, students learn more and as they see the positive results over time, they grow in motivation and participation.

I encourage my students using both directly, congratulating them when they are correct, or even just for trying in class, and indirectly, by taking an interest in them, and what they want to do and trying to highlight how what they learn might help them and give them an advantage in their pursuit of these goals.

I try to ensure that feedback for written work properly addresses weaknesses and lets the student see what changes they must make in order to improve their grade. I also encourage students to reflect on their own work by asking them to submit a post-mortem outlining what they would do differently if they could do it again.

To generate participation, I never accept the answer "I don't know". If offered, I say - "OK, well let's work it out together." I then proceed to try and tease the answer out of students by asking them the questions that they should be asking themselves while they "think on their feet". It is key that all students are asked randomly and we avoid the free-riding problem mentioned above.

As the inclusive, active-learning environment is new to students, some persistence is typically needed. But over time, students begin to naturally think on their feet and so I can continually make the questions I ask them harder, deeper and more difficult to think through so that they develop the skills further.

Another simple thing is to apply the human touch. Getting to know your students and showing an interest in them certainly makes them more interested in your teaching and allows them to feel a really important part of the class.

Finally, the reality is that students will never focus 100% in your classes and sometimes will drift off. Breaks in the teaching - either by changing the style of teaching and approach (pair work, etc...), or even just a pause to retrace the main points so far - allow lost students the opportunity to mentally rejoin the session.

Going Forward

While I feel I have found an effective method of teaching that students generally enjoy, and I am very proud of my teaching record to date, I am constantly looking to learn and develop as a teacher, seeking new teaching methods to improve the student learning experience. As such, I have pursued many courses aimed at developing my teaching methods. I also speak with some of my senior colleagues whom I know to be excellent teachers about the methods of teaching that they find effective. All of this allows me to reflect on my existing teaching practices and refine them or to augment them with new approaches.

Additionally, I am undertaking some pedagogical research to explore the effectiveness of a higher cost teaching method. The project aims to quantify the effect of a popular classroom teaching game on student outcomes. To do this I am using an experiment with students as my learning subjects; I will assess the extent of, and quantify, the benefits of a classroom game on student outcomes in both the short- and medium-run.

Helping Others

Despite being young and relatively new to the profession, I have, as I hope I have made clear, a real passion for teaching. As part of this, I am committed to enhancing the effectiveness of other members of the profession as teachers.

I do this in a number of ways. As an advisory board member, since 2006, of The Economics Network I am able to influence the policies and direction of the main body which supports the development of teaching of economics at Universities in the UK. Moreover, I am Warwick's Economics Department representative so I am also able to pass information to my colleagues to make them aware of the excellent resources available through the Network.

I am actively involved with the training of newer members of the profession. Within the department, I run the training for new Postgraduate Teaching Assistants, and I am also involved in supervising those who choose to further their teaching development with the Learning and Development Centre. Nationally, via the Economics Network, I help to run some of their teaching courses for new Graduate Teaching Assistants and for New Lecturers (despite being one myself!) I realise that my exact style is not suited to everyone, but I believe my low-cost, high-value-added teaching techniques can be adapted to all styles. As such, I try to help people to find the style that works for them such that it also leads to positive student experiences.

A final aspect of this is my shared views on teaching in the form of "Good Teaching Case Studies" (one entitled "Coaching Economics" and one on "Employability, Transferable Skills and Student Motivation") which have been published by the Economics Network. This current reflection on my teaching is a further contribution which benefits from a few more years of experience in teaching.

Conclusion

Overall, I love teaching and I really get a buzz from it. I believe it helps my research and I find that imparting knowledge to students is greatly fulfilling.