TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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Over my collegiate career, I have enrolled in, audited, or worked as a teaching assistant for more than 120 courses. I have learned from Nobel Prize winners and former Presidential advisers, and have witnessed a wide variation in teaching efficacy. Ultimately, it was my senior year experience in Donald Hafner's *American Foreign Policy* that did the most to shape my teaching philosophy. Professor Hafner so captivated his students that the seats filled 10 minutes before the course started and the discussion always seemed to run over by 5 minutes – and with no rustling of binders to mark the expiration of official time. Undergraduates came to class prepared to discuss course readings, and worked hard on assignments, as much to win the esteem of the professor, with whom they had established a close personal relationship, as to secure a good grade. It was my experience in this course that led me to choose a career in academia, with the goal of one day creating a "great course" – a memorable and meaningful learning experience for students in the mode of Hafner's legendary *American Foreign Policy.*

Professor Hafner, despite lacking extraordinary amounts of charisma or dynamism, succeeded thanks to engaging, well-prepared lectures and by empowering his students with great expectations for their involvement in class discussion. In the course students gained both specific knowledge (facts, vocabulary, concepts, and real insights) and practical skills with general applicability. To spark interest among the disinterested, a great course in any subject must rise above teaching definitions and field literacy, and include "Aha!" experiences – insights about the world not already obvious to the intelligent layperson, making the game worth the candle.

In terms of specific knowledge, in economics there are basic models, facts, and relationships detailing the causes of events that every economics major should master. I often find that even senior economics undergraduates do not have basic knowledge drilled in – such as the general relationship between inflation, unemployment, and GDP, much less how these variables generally interact with the exchange rate and the current account. This is in spite of the fact that undergraduate economics education is designed to promote economic literacy, which in practice can mean having students memorize a list of definitions (*e.g.*, "crowding out"), and expecting them to know how a series of models function (*i.e.*, when government spending increases, which way does the IS curve shift?). All too often, the difficulty students have with these models on exams comes because they are asked to tinker with a model in a manner quite foreign from the homework assignments, or because some students struggle with the mathematical tools. An alternative method to separate students for grading purposes is to simultaneously lower the level of difficulty by giving students more homework drills to make the models and tools more familiar, while also expanding the amount of material the students are responsible for and raising expectations for more complete mastery of the models. As an experienced TA, I also advocate clear delineations of what material will be covered on exams, and believe that lectures and textbooks should be supplemented with videos, books, and articles capable of sparking interest in the material, providing perspective, and teaching students more than what can be covered in lecture (the professor and TAs should not have to do all the lifting).

As an economic historian, I believe it is also helpful to teach students economic theory in the context of economic history so that they can understand current events and may one day be able to shape future policy (to paraphrase Keynes). Instead of a model-centric course that overloads students with one model after another in succession – comparative advantage followed by Heckscher-Ohlin followed by the Ricardo-Viner Specific Factors model – I believe it is more effective to teach students theory in the context of real world applications. For example, Heckscher-Ohlin should be taught in the context of the first wave of globalization for which the theory was created, when land-intensive countries such as the US and Argentina exported agricultural goods, and the Ricardo-Viner model in the context of the great debate between Thomas

Malthus and David Ricardo on the implications of the repeal of the English Corn Laws. Lastly, economic history and theory should be taught with an eye toward enlightening students on economic policy questions of today rather than as ends in themselves – and so Macro Theory should be taught along with the gold standard and the Great Depression in order to understand the Euro crisis and the "lesser depression" today, while taking care not to oversimplify the parallels.

The skills taught should teach students to "learn how to learn," and should also aim to improve students analytical faculties and to teach students to think like economists. In professor Hafner's course, the assignments were short five-page "policy memos," designed after the policy briefs the professor had written while working in the State Department during the Carter administration. The memos required students to leverage their knowledge of the course material, the facts and theories, to analyze a specific foreign policy problem. The assignments were designed to foster analytical maturity as writing requires one to probe material deeply. Students were rewarded with constructive written feedback from the professor. (This sort of direct, personalized assessment from the professor should not be discounted as a motivational tool – in large scale randomized controlled trials I conducted while at the DNC, I confirmed studies finding that voters are more likely to turn out when they are informed that whether they vote is public record.) By contrast, Economics Ph.D. programs generally focus on technical modeling with little direct real feedback from the professor apart from a letter grade. While math skills have allowed economists to uncover many invaluable insights, ultimately it is unclear whether providing students technical tools alone is enough to train scholars possessing the brand of well-rounded analytical maturity typified by Keynes' famous description of the requirements of becoming a master economist – "[she] must be mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher..."

In the economics context, these policy briefs could include requirements for technology usage regarding data analysis and presentation. As the Internet is now awash in data, locating, analyzing and presenting data are critically useful skill sets for a wide variety of occupations, and should be featured accordingly in undergraduate economics courses. Simply plotting various cuts of the relevant data at different levels of aggregation can lead to the discovery of economic puzzles and insights, and in my experience with manufacturing, surprisingly often contradicts the biases of many leading economists and findings of peer-reviewed research. While I was never asked to pull, analyze, and present data from the Census Bureau or the World Bank as an undergraduate economics major, in my office jobs – as a quant at the DNC and as a Staff Economist in the Obama Administration – I did little else. Some students who find the language of econometrics inaccessible may discover they have real talent for analyzing actual data, and so while spending a lecture walking students through how to pull county-level census data and run a regression in Stata might seem like a trivial step, it might be one which could expand a student's mental horizons about what is possible.

That student may one day find herself, as I once did, in the Oval Office with the President. If I have succeeded by then in creating a "great course" – a meaningful and insightful learning experience in the mode of Professor Hafner, then she will have something to say.