

Simple Steps to Effective Teaching

The basis of a presentation for the IIE Celebrate Teaching and Learning 2012 event in

Cape Town

on 11 July 2012

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The paragraphs which follow are based on the teaching philosophy statement which I included in my Teaching Portfolio in February 2012.

We work in an environment where there is a perception that many students are focused on the end goal, which is to acquire a diploma or a degree, so that they can get a job. To this end there is much emphasis on preparing for exams, and I fear that sometimes we – the lecturers and students alike – lose sight of the real reason for spending time together: to learn in such a way that we become more complete individuals.

I teach economics. This dynamic subject gives a tremendous amount of scope for improving one's understanding of the world in which we function. A thorough understanding of the basic principles of the subject allow the individual to evaluate their outlook and the way in which they make decisions. It is true that these facts and theories need to be learned in order to deal with questions in an exam. However, I believe that the true value of what is learned manifests itself over time, as the student begins to appreciate their superior understanding of how the world around them functions. An understanding of what drives people, organisations and governments to make certain decisions in particular circumstances enables the student to make better proactive (and in some cases reactive) decisions.

I don't teach with the sole aim of getting students to pass an exam. It is important; but to me what is more important is that the student leaves my class with properly embedded understanding and skills, which will stay with them for life.

My teaching methodology is simple. I explain the underlying terms, concepts or calculations in a clear, structured format. I always try to link the content to the real world, and get the students to apply what has been learned to possible situations they may find themselves in, currently or in the future. Students should not arrive at my class week after week, expecting to be simply doused with information. They are

given opportunities to express their views and to gauge their progress; for this reason I believe in continuous assessment with meaningful feedback.

Education management seems to be very focused on academic theory; some of the most notable pillars being Bloom's taxonomy, fundamental pedagogics and didactics, among others. I don't think that the students care too much about the extent to which a teacher is aware of, or even follows, these theories. I fear that some of us miss the fact that we are dealing with PEOPLE, who basically need motivation, love and support. Besides the technical stuff, like being thoroughly prepared for a class, I believe that it is CRUCIAL for the teacher to love their subject, love their environment and to love their students. A negative attitude will not attract students to one's class.

As a young teacher, I worked at a college which had a small poster on the notice board in the staff room. It said: *"Choose to enjoy every day, and have fun with your students."* Even though I like to operate in an orderly environment (and therefore maintain such an environment in my classroom), I really do believe that there should be an element of enjoyment in the teaching/learning session. If an opportunity for a joke or a wisecrack comes up, I pounce on it. Everybody enjoys a good laugh. I have found that the occasional joke or dry observation keeps the students on their toes, helps to draw out the reserved students and creates a comfortable atmosphere. I really believe that the importance of this element in teaching is greatly underestimated.

Former Vice-President of the USA, Dan Quayle, once said that "the job of the vice president can be summed up in one word: To be prepared." This is why they say you only get three kinds of people in this world: Those who can count, and those who can't. You should see the rolling eyes and hear the groans when someone (and there's always one) says "and what's the third....?" You've just had a little taste of what happens in my classroom on a daily basis.

On a serious note, my teaching philosophy can be summed up in four basic points, all starting with "P":

- Preparation
- Participation
- Passion
- Personality

I believe that these are the key ingredients to being a successful teacher. Students will feel "safe" in your classroom if you look like you know what you are doing, and for this you should **prepare** for each lesson. Encourage them and allow them to **participate**, by asking questions and giving enough time for everyone to have a

chance at thinking about their response. Be **passionate** about your subject – if you *look* like you love your subject, the students will see it and this will motivate them. Let your **personality** shine through. The field of economics churns out plenty of wacky examples, incredible facts and interesting characters.... use anecdotes and stories to entertain your students at appropriate intervals. There is no need to be boring.

I do believe that a lecturer should enjoy their time with the students and share the experience and wisdom gained from the “exams” passed (and failed) in the “university of life”. I have often motivated my students with anecdotes of my own student days, which included a daily commute from Rondebosch to Stellenbosch everyday (for four years), selling drugs to put myself through varsity (I worked in a pharmacy), the consequences of playing Portuguese rummy instead of studying the night before an exam, and the value of being able to touch type. I sometimes receive e-mails from former students commenting on decisions they have made based on what we talked about in the classroom, and I know that it was worth moving out of the textbook for a while.

To conclude: enjoy your teaching.... it's much better than having to *work* for a living!