

STEPHEN SUN

Department of Economics, University of California, Davis
1 Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616

Email: smsun@ucdavis.edu

Phone: (+1) 310-738-3883

Statement of Teaching Philosophy:

What is necessary in order to be a good teacher in economics? Certainly, a mastery of the material, but if one were to poll a hundred economics professors, surely not a one would reply that that was the only thing needed. A good economics teacher must possess many characteristics, some of which are common to good teachers of any subject, and some which are specific to economics. Our subject seeks to explain by imposing mathematical structure on the chaotic multitude of individual decisions. So the instructor must be able to teach the model, but beyond simply introducing the model, must be able to explain the whys of the model. To develop intuition, to clarify the concepts being taught, to demonstrate relevance to life, and to ensure that the students do not fall into dogmatic acceptance of the models being taught but retain a critical understanding of their functions and their shortcomings, I believe it is necessary to relate the material to real-world examples; not just once or twice, but over and over again.

In addition to understanding the material and being able to explain the material and place it in context, I also try to consider the students to whom I am teaching the material. Students come in many varieties, both in terms of their prior knowledge in mathematics, economics, and general subjects, and also in their reasons for studying economics. For example, at a large institution like UC Davis, an introductory-level economics course will typically have in the neighborhood of four hundred students. Among those students will be those who are planning to major or minor in economics, but because introductory economics courses fulfill a general education requirement, there will also be many who come to the class with no great interest in the subject and no plans to study it further after the conclusion of the course.

How can these disparate objectives be negotiated? In teaching the major students, the goal must be to prepare them for future coursework. Given the different goals of the non-major students, the development of technical ability is naturally less important. As an instructor, I would consider myself successful if I were able to inspire interest in the material, and they were able to take useful intuition for the future from the course. In this case, I would propose to avoid digressions (subject, of course, to the planned curriculum of subsequent courses) and tailor lectures and testing materials to cover the core topics as thoroughly as possible. By making liberal use of real-world examples, both current and historical, the topic can be seen in many different contexts, which will aid the development of intuition.

For a teacher, the ideal scenario is one where a high degree of student participation can be achieved. In the case of a small class, this can be done directly by the instructor. Unfortunately, this is much more difficult to achieve in lecture for a large class such as the one in my example. To achieve the best results, the instructor must also coordinate the efforts of any assistants; good administrative communication is thus essential. In my personal experience, this has been demonstrated repeatedly, so I strongly emphasize it. Just as the students enter the course with varying levels of prior knowledge and expertise, so do assistants: it's vital that less experienced assistants be given proper support to ensure that they can develop their skills as teachers as well.

In the foregoing statement I have talked only about the mechanics of teaching: what is to be taught, and how. But teaching must be about more than that. Ultimately, teaching is a matter of heart--the enthusiasm for teaching, the patience to understand and connect with students, and the determination to continuously adapt one's methods to the students' needs. These things cannot be substituted for by technical mastery alone. For me, teaching is all about storytelling. As an economic historian, I convey my enthusiasm through historical anecdotes. It is my belief that with the right stories I can humanize the subject matter and make it memorable to the students. I hope that I can inspire students to take up the study of economics, but if not, I can at least inspire them to see economics, in the news, in life, and in history, with new eyes.

Because I am an economic historian I think it only natural to want to teach economic history. My past teaching experience is in microeconomics and economic history. But historians are also by necessity generalists, so I am capable of filling in for many topics. I have some experience in trade, applied micro, development, and industrial organization. I would approach the task of teaching any course with the same vigor that I would courses in my specialty; I have found from time to time that teaching different material has exposed me to knowledge useful for research, as well. I am also willing to participate in advising. In my time as a student I have confronted many obstacles and I think my experience with these situations puts me in a good position to help others overcome them.