

Cameron M. Weber, PhD in economics and historical studies

Brooklyn, NY, USA

cameroneconomics.com

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

My chosen fields are political economy, economic history and cultural economics. The main thing I try to instill in my students is a sense of critical thinking when deciding for themselves as to what is the best type of society in which to live. I would like my students to not believe everything in the mainstream media and to “question authority” in the form of politicians and technocrats and experts. A lot of people are afraid of economics as may believe it is overly-technical, I make economics down-to-earth and use current events to make it living. On the first day of class I introduce Yale University economist Thomas Sowell’s “rule”,

The first law of economics is that resources are scarce. The first law of politics is to ignore the first law of economics.

This insight helps us to frame the discussions in class on current events during the semester(s) surrounding economics and politics as related to concepts in the course syllabi and as related to news items surrounding each student’s main field(s) of study. Current events of relevance help students to engage in economics as something immediately applicable.

The course syllabus is a key part of my teaching philosophy. This document sets the “social contract” for our relationships together from the very beginning. For example, my responsibility is to make sure that anything ‘testable’ is discussed in class and that I cover everything as advertised in the syllabus in the order that it appears (with of course exceptions for ideas and current events of immediate relevance). Students are responsible for meeting the deliverable deadlines and for having only one voice in the classroom at a time (people are free to leave the classroom if they need to have an alternative discussion together). In this way we are all on the same page literally.

I then too use this social contract as a means to have open and honest and hopefully lively conversations, where there are no irrelevant enquiries in the classroom. It is for this reason as well that we don't allow recording in the classroom and that class participation is 15% of the course grade.

I have several methods for assessing students' comprehension of the material. In addition to class discussion I give both a written homework assignment and an in-class quiz on the law of Supply and Demand. I review these items and give feedback and then the students have the option to redo the work for more course credit, addressing my comments and as well adding or changing things they may have learned subsequently. I set office hours and am also available by appointment when students might like to discuss their ideas in more detail in person.

We also have a group research and presentation module, the content for which depends on which class it is. In this way students learn to work with each other and to present their research together concisely as a team. The presentations are graded, half of the grade comes from peer-review by the students themselves and half from me. The exams are multiple choice and we go over in class together the right and wrong answers, with each student addressing an exam question. I am a firm believer in both the social construction of knowledge and of experiential learning (or "learning-by-doing" in the language of growth theory). We learn from our mistakes.

These different means by which to test knowledge align to differing psychological personalities, some people are more introverted, some extraverts, some better at writing and research rather than memorizing concepts for an exam and/or engaging in class discussion. I draw on my experience in the Foreign Service and in international economic development where I have worked with people from all over the world. I enjoy learning from and teaching students from all backgrounds.

I use ideal-types in my pedagogy to help clarify concepts. For example we build ideal-types around two of the most influential economists through today, F.A. Hayek and J.M Keynes. Although friends, these two economists had opposing views in almost every way, from the role of government in the economy to the best monetary and trade policies. For example economists of the "Keynesian" ideal-type (who are far more in number than "Hayekians") believe that monetary and fiscal policy can be used to steer an economy through bad times and can create employment. Hayekians believe that macroeconomic policy interventions

exacerbate business cycles and create cronyism (it is for the former idea that Hayek won the Nobel) and that only entrepreneurs can create employment by introducing novel products and ideas into markets.

These are *reductio ad absurdum* rhetorical devices, they work in conveying ideas. There is a series of rap musical videos on youtube co-written by George Mason University economics professor Paul Roberts, one called “fight of the century”, which juxtaposes the ideas of Keynes and Hayek. When I started teaching these ideal-types the first video had around one million hits, it now has more than five million. In the spirit of reflexivity we note here that I am more Hayekian than Keynesian, so am able to present to my students both mainstream, orthodox, economics as well as heterodox schools of thought, including Austrian, Marxian, Institutional and Public Choice political economy. In this way students might have more choices about alternatives and a larger pool of ideas from which they might draw from in order to have or develop an interest in political economy as it relates to our day to day lives and contemporary communities.