Teaching Philosophy, Self-Assessment, and Support of Research

Like most faculty at NYU, I spend a lot of time planning my courses and preparing lectures. My basic approach is to continually ask: What would I want from a professor if I were a student in this course?

For example, as a student, I would be more motivated if the professor convinced me that the course material mattered. I would look forward to attending class if the professor used interesting examples from current news or personal anecdotes, rather than just the material in the book. And I would pay closer attention if the professor used humor, at random moments, and I never knew when it might come. I would want these things as a student, so I work hard to provide them in the classroom.

I’ve also learned (the hard way) that in economics, no student is a tabula rasa. Even in an introductory course, students arrive with prior notions and popular myths about how the economy works. If these ideas remain in the background, unchallenged, they become mental landmines -- destroying new insights. (We teachers should never assume that cognitive dissonance automatically resolves in favor of what we teach!) I try to anticipate these landmines and disarm them directly in class. And I encourage students to bring up any thoughts that seem to contradict the economic models they are learning.

A few words on self-assessment: In part, I measure my value-added by student performance on exams and problem sets. Many of the questions confront students with new situations, to see if they really understand how a concept is used. But most of my self-assessment occurs during class. Even in large-enrollment courses, I ask frequent questions of the class that can only be answered if students are “getting it.” If I haven’t been clear, I’ll try from a different angle. I’m not particularly forgiving when students miss class or don’t turn in work. But if a student attends class and pays attention and still doesn’t understand, I regard it as my problem, not the student’s.

Finally, a few words on supporting independent research: In the economics department, honors thesis advising is distributed by assignment among the faculty, and I’ve done my fair share of this. But I devote considerable time to unofficial advising and mentoring. I see dozens of students each semester who seek advice because they’ve hit a roadblock in their thesis and don’t know what to do next. Others come to get suggestions for additional reading, or to discuss the broader social context of some economic theory. I welcome these discussions, and when I can, I’ll expand my office hours to accommodate them. In addition, for the past three years (and again this year), I’ve served as a judge at the annual CAS Undergraduate Research Conference.