

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Ryan Safner

1 Overview

I have taught a fair variety of courses in my short academic career so far: course sizes ranging from 15 students to 50, three sections International Economic Policy, an advanced introduction to economics for non-economics majors, three sections of Introduction to Economics, a required, basic principles course for majors and non-majors, and two sections of Austrian Economics, an advanced seminar for economics majors on critically appraising and extending neoclassical economic tools with market process theory. Despite this variety, I teach all of my courses in a similar fashion that both my students and myself have found rewarding and successful. There are three three goals that I want students to get out of any of my courses: (a) to understand basic economic principles, (b) to think and write clearly and critically, and (c) to integrate economic analysis into their daily lives.

With the exception of my advanced seminar, I teach any of my classes as if it were the first and last economics class that these students will ever take, making sure to establish sound fundamentals. My students get excited and interested in the economic way of thinking as a useful tool for understanding the world, for being a responsible democratic citizen, and for application to their daily and professional lives. These classes have taught me much about how to be an effective teacher, and I plan to apply my teaching skills towards a wider variety of other courses.

2 Focus on fundamentals

The main focus of my courses is to ensure that my students walk away clearly understanding the fundamentals of economics and are able to combat the many misconceptions of our profession. This requires a foundation of the substantive propositions of basic economics: the purposiveness of individuals choosing means to achieve their ends; the role of prices in coordinating economic activity; and the role of social institutions in fostering coordination and exchange between individuals to channel private interest into public benefit. My courses are successful to the degree that my students can apply these principles to real-world settings, whether through their writing, or in class and private discussions.

Most of my students had very little training in mathematics or statistics, and rather than provide a remedial introduction and hope for the best, I follow Alfred Marshall and use plain English as the main engine of inquiry. I have found that students are more receptive to learning and understanding a concept if I explain it first in words and then through examples. The primary goal is for students to understand the *intuition* behind the principle or its application so that they can extrapolate and apply it themselves.

3 Clear Writing is Clear Thinking

My students invest a large portion of their grade into writing a paper on any topic in political economy that interests them, so long as it demonstrates use of clear relevant economic thinking. For more introductory courses, I have my students write a short Opinion-Editorial piece critiquing some economic claim in the news, or proposing their own policy or explanation of some phenomenon (and bonus points if it gets published anywhere!). In addition, I have them write several short current events papers to ground what we are learning in the classroom to real world events. For more advanced courses, I have my students write a research paper examining some issue along similar lines.

My writing assignments function as my main evaluation to determine whether the course has been successful in ensuring my students understand economic principles, can think and write clearly and critically, and can integrate economic analysis with their own interests. I emphasize to students that writing clearly and thinking clearly are inextricably linked, and that both are marketable skills that are useful in almost any profession.

I find that by engaging with ideas and each other in writing, they can develop their arguments and strengthen their critical thinking skills far better than if they were to simply read or take an exam. When time allows, my students peer review one another's work, and I assign a small portion of their paper grade based on the constructive comments they give to one of their peers anonymously in writing. I also dedicate class time to a discussion of how to write a clear and persuasive argument, and have students turn in multiple drafts of their papers for extensive comments to help improve their writing process.

4 Integrating Economics into Students' Lives

While my professional role is a small proportion of their education, I strive to integrate my courses with the larger breadth of learning experiences in my students' lives. Rather than memorize facts about what year the *Wealth of Nations* was written, I emphasize the importance of students demonstrating to me that they have developed a new set of skills to take with them. Following Mark Twain's quip, my goal is to not let students' formal schooling get in the way of their education.

I have found the best way to get my message across is to focus on student needs and imagine the environment and incentives from their perspective. In general, I try to think as if I am in the shoes of my students, and aim to connect the concepts we are learning to examples that they encounter in their daily lives, ideally through some interactive activity. When discussing rational ignorance of voters, I give my students a political knowledge quiz to demonstrate the concept (and the results have invariably confirmed the principle!). I am also particularly fond of using short video clips from popular TV shows to supplement or spark a discussion about economic principles. I use Omar's testimony in *The Wire* to prompt a discussion about the economics of black markets, Darth Vader "altering the deal" with Lando Calrissian in *Star Wars* to show the importance of rule of law, Larry David arguing with Christian Slater about the "unwritten laws" of the hors d'oeuvres table at parties in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to examine informal norms and common resources, and frequent clips from *South Park* for just about anything else. I have found that humor is one of the best ways of disarming defense mechanisms to ideas hostile to one's priors.

5 Conclusion

I have found the methods and goals that I have outlined above to be effective at achieving my teaching goals. The table below summarizes the available student course evaluations, indicating much stronger favor than is average for an economics course, by my students. I also provide some samples of the written comments I have received on these evaluations which further highlight my success. More informal and candid comments are available from Rate my Professors¹ and Wakeratings.² Original copies of these evaluations are available upon request. By continuing to focus on economic principles, engaging students in writing, and integrating lessons into their personal experiences, I believe I can apply my skills towards teaching a number of different courses.

	ECON 385			ECON 403
	Summer 2013	Fall 2013	Spring 2014	Summer 2015
Overall Rating of Teaching	5.00 (4.34)	4.57 (4.36)	4.77 (4.35)	5.00 (4.41)
Overall Rating of Course	4.86 (4.12)	4.43 (4.23)	4.38 (4.25)	5.00 (4.20)
Observations	15	23	32	10

Table 1: Summary of means from selected student course evaluation questions (questions 15 and 16 out of 16). Evaluations are scored from 1=lowest to 5=highest. Overall Economics Department means are reported in parentheses for comparison. Original evaluations available upon request.

Great course! Feedback on paper was the best feedback I have ever gotten, in that it was thorough and constructive. Saffner was always available when needed and great at answering questions.

Prof. Saffner was by far one of the best professors I've had. He showed great passion through teaching and effectively motivated the students to do better academically.

- lectures were interesting and interactive
- readings + homeworks/quizzes helped me to learn the information
- enthusiasm for teaching made me want to learn the material.

The homeworks and the books assigned. Ryan did an excellent job relating topics discussed in class to the real world to help us better understand. This has been my favorite class at Masan So far!

¹<http://www.ratemyp Professors.com/ShowRatings.jsp?tid=1820638>

²http://wakeratings.com/professor.php?ID_tmpSchedule=3915

Ryan is a fantastic educator. He is clearly very passionate about his field, and he cares very much about student success and our understanding of course content. He made economics not only more clear, but also a lot more interesting. Definitely consider him to be one of the best educators I have taken at EMU.