Teaching Philosophy

Higher education should be a time when students are exposed to new ideas and their existing worldviews are challenged. As a teacher, I feel it is my duty to promote these practices in my classes. In my experience, the best way for teachers to motivate students to embrace learning is to demonstrate an enthusiasm and passion for knowledge. Also, to alter students’ perceptions about the world around them, it is crucial that students learn to trust their teachers. I have found that the best way to do this is by treating students like human beings. Although technological improvements have improved the delivery of course material, these innovations are not adequate substitutes for a teacher who exudes a passion for ideas, cares about students, and possesses an art for storytelling.

My primary objectives as a teacher are to foster critical reasoning skills and philosophical creativity in my students. To do this, I try to create a classroom environment that facilitates classroom discussion. Although the nature of the course often demands that some of the class time is devoted to lecture presentations, I usually allow some time for a discussion of each topic. Typically, I have the students read an article or a portion of a book that is critical of the economic model or general idea presented. For instance, in my Principles of Macroeconomics course, I have had the students read portions of T.R. Reid’s *The United States of Europe* and Paul Hawken’s *The Ecology of Commerce*. In my Women and Work in the U.S. Economy course, I present Gary Becker’s human capital theory as an explanation for the gender wage gap, and then have the students critique his argument by entertaining other explanations for the discrepancies between men’s and women’s monetary compensation.

Because students learn in many different ways, I incorporate learning devices outside of discussion such as individual papers, homework and group work. Allowing students to work in groups is an effective way for me to gauge the general comprehension level of the class. I usually spend a few minutes with each group, answering questions and clarifying explanations presented in lecture. Having the students work in groups is also a great way to learn students’ names – a feat I have accomplished in every class I have instructed. Learning names is an important technique to earning their trust and also contributes to group discussion. Students seem to appreciate it as well; many have expressed their gratitude in course evaluations.

I often incorporate my knowledge as a U.S. economic historian into my Principles of Macroeconomics classes to provide students with “real world” examples. For instance, we examine President Nixon’s political business cycle of 1972 and his New Economic Policy. For this topic, I share an audio clip of Nixon and the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Arthur Burns discussing the use of monetary tools to “goose the economy.” Having students hear how Presidents manipulate economic tools illustrates the importance and power of fiscal and monetary policies on the economy better than I
alone can articulate. I have received positive feedback from students regarding the use of economic history in the course, and I hope to incorporate more in the future.

To evaluate students’ learning I use a variety of methods. For my Principles of Macroeconomics courses, students’ grades are comprised mostly of their performance on exams and homework assignments. However, I don’t rely exclusively on multiple choice questions to judge students’ progress. I think it is important for students to articulate what they have learned – a skill that requires more than filling in a bubble sheet. Therefore, my exams have multiple choice questions, problems, and short answer questions. In addition, I have introduced writing assignments into my classes. I try to promote good, rigorous writing skills and encourage students to use reasoned arguments in their papers; that is, arguments based on solid empirical and philosophical foundations. To facilitate their writing progress, students can turn in a first draft which I critique and offer suggestions for improvement. Their final papers are better as a result, but more importantly, their writing skills improve in general. I suspect that many students have not received such intense attention paid to their writing. The process is time-intensive, but is a rewarding experience both for myself and my students.

Students in my Women and Work in the U.S. Economy course are evaluated using essay exams, group presentations, and individual papers. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the course, allowing students to express their thinking on the topics in their own words proved to be an efficient and fair approach in judging their learning. My economics students would often present their arguments with graphs, my women’s studies and anthropology majors would craft their arguments more often with words. Both approaches were successful in portraying their critical reasoning skills and reflection on course material.

In accordance with my philosophy of challenging students’ worldviews, I encourage them to take advantage of opportunities unique to higher education. I announce speakers, documentaries, and conferences coming to campus. Every semester I promote study abroad opportunities – in my opinion an increasingly necessary component of a higher education. I also share my research interests with my students and promote theirs. The University of Nebraska has a program known as UCARE which supports collaboration between faculty members and undergraduate students. I participated in the program as an undergraduate student and it was instrumental in sparking my interest in graduate school. Enriching students’ learning experience with research applications of course material can improve their understanding and, perhaps, ignite their curiosity enough to pursue learning beyond what is being covered on the next exam.

My commitment to my students continues after our course is complete. During the summer of 2006, I organized a voluntary “summer reading group” with former students outside of class. Following students’ book suggestions, about eight to ten students and I read Jonathan Kozol’s *The Shame of a Nation*. We met every few weeks for about a month to discuss the book at a local coffeehouse near campus. It was an enjoyable experience and something I would like to organize again.
One of my most positive experiences in graduate school has been teaching. I look forward to improving my teaching skills and refining my philosophy as I continue to grow as a teacher. In my role as a teacher, I strive to have a positive influence on the lives of my students, on the field of economics, and on higher education.

Summary of Courses Taught

Over the course of one year, I have taught two different classes, five sections, and over 250 students. A summary of these courses is listed below to provide insight into my teaching ability and methods.

**Principal of Macroeconomics**

Description of Course Material: This course provides an introduction to economics with a concentration on macroeconomics. Macroeconomics examines the functioning of the national economy as well as the international economy. The course covers the measurement and analysis of various aggregate economic outcomes such as GDP, unemployment, and inflation. We also discuss fiscal and monetary policy and its role in stabilizing the national economy. Finally, international trade and economic growth are examined.

Currently I use the textbook by McConnell and Brue and assign additional readings, such as The United States of Europe and The Ecology of Commerce and other outside articles. I usually evaluate my students based on four exams, a homework assignment that corresponds to each exam, and usually some sort of writing assignment. I post an outline of my lecture notes online for students to bring to class to aid them in organizing the material presented in class. Most of my lectures are delivered using the aid of the whiteboard, but I also use PowerPoint and overheads when the material calls for it. We work through many problems together in class, and I post additional problems online.

**Women and Work in the U.S. Economy**

Semester: Spring 2006  
Description of Course Material: This 300-level, cross-listed course provides a study of the transformation of women’s role in the U.S. economy from colonial times to the present. We examine the effects of class and race on women’s economic role in society. In so doing, it is my hope that students better understand the current position of women in the U.S. economy by developing this historical framework.

The required course materials for this course are Alice Kessler-Harris’s Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States and Jacqueline

Students had a mid-term and a final exam, along with two individual papers and a group presentation. In my syllabus, I described these papers as “projects” since research outside the campus library was required. One of these projects had students explore occupational segregation. Students were asked to collect data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics website and examine what jobs are held largely by women and what jobs are held largely by men, wage differentials, and female participation rates. In addition, they interviewed a woman employed in a “traditional” occupation for women and a “non-traditional” one. We then discussed their findings in class and, hopefully in the process, challenged their notions of a gender and race blind labor market. Most of the class material was presented in traditional lecture format. Although this method was satisfactory, next time I want to incorporate more PowerPoint presentations to better organize the notes for students and to provide a historical context through photographs and documentary film clips.

**Honors Contracting**

If a student expresses the desire to learn more, I embrace the occasion to collaborate with students and help them shape their own learning experiences. To provide students with additional suggested reading, every semester I share my “Summer (or Winter Break) Reading List for Terrific Undergraduate Students” with my classes. I have also contracted each of the above classes for credit in the Honors Program by allowing students to perform an additional assignment, ranging from a book review, a research paper, and/or a class presentation. Although this creates additional work for me, it provides my Honor students with an opportunity to create their own learning experiences and enriches the class in general since they share their results with the rest of the class. Working individually with students is my favorite aspect of the occupation.
Evaluation of Teaching

The following quotations are from anonymous student evaluations at the end of the semester.

“She was one of best instructors I’ve had in a long time. Presented excellent notes in class and explained everything very well. I learned a lot in this class, would recommend her as a teacher to anyone.”

“She was knowledgeable, prepared and enthusiastic. She was great.”

“It was really good – she’s the best graduate student I’ve had as an instructor at UNL.”

“Lots of examples! Thorough notes and coverage of material. Good at answering questions, good pace of class. Great job…really good instructor.”

“Rather than just doing overheads or PowerPoints, she wrote notes on the board so she was going the same pace as us, explaining as we went. She had good handouts and reviews and always made sure we understood the lesson. She has a good teaching style and connects well with the class.”

“Made the class fun and interesting. Kept students interested by involving them, asking questions and involving stuff that happened in the real world.”

“Beth was so great. It was always so evident that she cared about our class and spent a lot of time preparing for each lecture. She would bring in examples she had found from articles or books or she found on the Internet. She always brought in the most current information as well. I don’t think there is anything that could have made the class better. She made economics interesting to me, which I didn’t think was possible! It was very obvious that this was a subject that she was excited about so it made it fun to come to class.”

“Made it easy to pay attention. She is the best economics teacher that I have had here at UNL.”

“This instructor was excellent. I really enjoyed everything about her. She was adept to our needs and she had a wide knowledge of the topic. You could tell she loved what she was doing. I really liked her teaching style.”

“The instructor lectured using very well prepared presentations. The enthusiasm and energy displayed by the professor encouraged me to do well in the class. I have never had an instructor with this much passion and energy for their subject. Also very knowledgeable about the subject.”
“She gives very detailed notes enthusiastically. She also went out of her way to work with me to contract the class as an Honors class. I enjoyed the class and appreciated her effort.”

“Beth did a great job of both relating the subject to students and sparking interest in the topics being covered. Its great to see such passion and tenacity for the subject combined with such great teaching skills.”

“Thoroughly and effectively taught the material. Made everything really easy to understand. Gave us problems sets to prepare for tests. Brought in outside material – articles and documentaries. She did most things really, really well – great graduate student teacher!”

“She was always there to help you when you needed it. Whether it meant taking time out of her schedule or just office hours, she would do it. Always helpful and was a good professor to learn from. I don’t think there is one thing I would do differently.”

“Taught and explained the course very well. One of my best teachers in college. Worked very hard for the class.”

“She always had great examples. After explaining a new concept she provided a simple example followed by a more complex one, this really helped. Also, her notes were given in a clear and understandable order, with one concept building on the previous.”

“Wanted us to learn. She was easy to talk to; excellent professor.”

“She was clearly passionate about the material and conveyed that to the class.”

“Beth was awesome, she lectured on interesting topics, and always made class fun. Great in-class discussions, fun learning environment, interesting.”

“The group projects were fun.”

“Very organized lectures. Extremely personable – knew all names in class.”

“Through the writing assignments, we actually had to examine the material we covered and understand it enough to write on it.”

“I was impressed with the amount of discussion that would take place in class. Everyone did a good job contributing thoughts, ideas, and opinions on topics.”
Honors Related to Teaching

For two consecutive years I was awarded the Bingham Fellowship for Teaching. This competitive fellowship is given to two to four economic graduate students each year and includes a monetary award. In addition, I received the Department’s annual teaching award, “Award for Excellence in Teaching by a Graduate Student” for the 2005-06 academic year in recognition of my teaching abilities.

Teaching Interests and Future Course Creation

My teaching interests reflect the interdisciplinary nature of my fields: U.S. Economic History and Feminist Economics. I enjoy teaching Principles of Macroeconomics and hope to continue teaching it in the future. Though I have yet to teach Principles of Microeconomics, I am confident that I can excel in this course as well. The Women and Work and the U.S. Economy course is a great intersection of my fields and I would enjoy the opportunity to teach this course in the future. In addition, I would like to develop courses on U.S. Economic History, Political Economy, the Evolution of Capitalism, as well as a course on Feminist Economic Theory.

I also want to create and sponsor a study abroad program that offers students a global perspective on economics. During the summer of 2003 I participated in a study abroad program to Sweden. The program was developed by Dr. Ann Mari May and entitled, “21st Century Alternatives: Women, Work, and Family in Sweden.” The course allowed me to think creatively about policies for women and their occupations in the U.S. during the new century. I would like to provide my students with a similar opportunity. Finally, I was involved in the ongoing creation of an integrative, cap-stone course in our department. The course, Consumption and American Society, will incorporate both microeconomic and macroeconomic theory and offer a critical perspective on the consumer culture prevalent in American society. I would enjoy collaborating with different departments across campus to offer a similar course with an interdisciplinary perspective on the topic.

Teaching Improvements Activities

To stay current on progress in the field of teaching, I participate in conferences and workshops to improve my teaching skills. These conferences also facilitate discussion and brainstorming with fellow instructors on the challenges of teaching. For instance, I attended workshops for graduate teaching assistants in August 2006. These workshops addressed a variety of pedagogical topics, such as strategies for teaching first-year college students and how to lead a group discussion. In 2004, I completed a semester course titled “Teaching College Economics and Business” that exposed me to the many challenges graduate students are faced with when teaching for the first time. I entered my first year of teaching better prepared as a result. I also participated in teaching workshops in February of 2005. These workshops provided an overview of the scholarship of teaching and learning as well as an opportunity to learn about innovative
teaching techniques from established professors across disciplines. I have incorporated some of these methods into my classes. Finally, I have had colleagues sit in on my classes to offer their suggestions to improve my teaching.

Academic Service

I am involved in many service activities on campus, and will highlight my most recent activities here. This year I am serving as a McNair Mentor. The McNair Scholars Program pairs undergraduate students who are members of underrepresented groups and interested in pursuing graduate studies with doctoral students who are in the final stages of their program. A few times a month I meet with my McNair undergraduate student to discuss preparation for graduate school and research interests, or simply to socialize and provide supportive encouragement. I also serve as Vice-President for the Economics Graduate Student Association. I help ensure that new students become integrated into the department, especially those students who were not allocated office space in the department. Establishing a network of support is critical for first-year doctoral students; to help achieve this, I invite first-year students to share their concerns with me with regarding their program.