

Marta Podemska-Mikluch

Department of Economics
Beloit College
700 College Street
Beloit, WI 53511

Cell-phone: 612-801-9476
Office-phone: 608-363-2722
E-mail: podemskam@beloit.edu
Homepage: www.podemska.com

Teaching Philosophy

Being born in Poland at a time when obtaining a weekly supply of toilet paper required ability and aptitude, I was always sensitive to the role public policy plays in our lives. My interests were deepened by the economic transition. I decided to pursue a degree in Political Science at the University of Łódź. It was at the UŁ, and more specifically in the classes offered by the Department of American Studies, that I grew interested in the causes of American prosperity. Along with my classmates, I dreamt of traveling to the United States to witness first hand what we read about in our textbooks. Today, it is impossible for me to convey how out of reach those dreams seemed at the time. Yet in my sophomore year, to my greatest astonishment and joy, I won a scholarship that allowed me to transfer to St. Cloud State University in Minnesota.

At St. Cloud I discovered what appeared to be an inconceivable educational system: my professors were genuinely interested in my work! It was a novel, life-altering experience. I could not comprehend the individual attention students were given and only with time I began to understand how institutional environments shape our interactions. The structure of academia in Poland allows little room for student-teacher interactions. Professors lecture and give oral exams at the end of the semester but never offer office hours and casual conversations between faculty and students are rare.

I will never forget the intimidation I felt when in my first semester at St. Cloud a professor emailed me asking that I stop by his office to talk about the essay I just submitted. I still remember all of the feedback and encouragement I received from him that day. However, what stood out to me the most is the genuine interest that the professor took in my work and his effort to help me improve. Ever since that first semester at St. Cloud State, throughout my masters and the doctoral program, I was blessed with wonderful professors, ones that were not only my teachers but also my mentors. Every one of them provided me with guidance and gave me the confidence to push forward. It was these precious interactions that today inform the three main elements of my teaching philosophy: enthusiasm, clear expectations, and intellectual openness.

Enthusiasm

While many aspects of living and studying in the United States amazed me, my next profound discovery took place in the economics classroom: my first encounter with the economic way of thinking. I never expected that the reluctantly taken elective would be so illuminating, that it would alter my understanding of almost everything I thought I knew, and that it would help me make sense of Poland's turbulent past. From that point on, the world around me appeared to be filled with illustrations of the applicability of the economic way of thinking, and after a while I could no longer think in any other way.

This experience is the reason why I build my introductory courses to maximize the likelihood that my students make a similar discovery early in the semester. I do so by encouraging students to analyze stories from popular books and movies from an economics perspective. My favorite in this regard is the series of books about the underage wizard, Harry Potter, because it contains numerous charming illustrations of basic economics principles. The new understanding of popular stories gained from this exercise motivates the students to apply the economic way of thinking more broadly and to study economics with greater tenacity.

I believe one of the reasons this approach works so well for me lies in the fact that discussing economics gives me great joy and causes me to radiate enthusiasm, at least according to student evaluations. By its nature, enthusiasm is contagious and once students catch it they become internally motivated to learn. Since great performance is never born from a focus on grades or income, I seek to turn the process of transforming my enthusiasm into students' internal motivation into the defining characteristic of my teaching style.

Clear Expectations

Successful learning environments must be characterized by clear expectations. Students need to feel in control of their progress, in order to experience the comfort necessary for challenging intellectual pursuits. If students are uncertain what to do to pass the course, their time is wasted on guesswork. To save them this hassle, I design my syllabi with great care in the effort to provide well-defined rules, clear objectives, and unambiguous requirements. On the first day of classes I tell my students that the syllabus is a form of contract and I ask them to study it carefully, to ask clarifying questions, and to suggest changes should any be needed. I also tell them that if they remain in class after they familiarize themselves with the syllabus, they will be required to abide by its terms.

Of course, there must be more than one party to any true contract, which means that I am as much required to follow the syllabus, as are the students. For example I honor my commitment to the contractual nature of the syllabus by not changing the grading rules during the semester. For this reason I systematically refuse requests for extra credit opportunities. Instead, I account for performance irregularities by using a diverse grading formula. Some students do better on essays, others prefer multiple-choice questions, still others do great on homework assignments but the stress of timed in-class exams causes them to underperform on exams. By using diverse methods to measure students' progress, I account for these differences and avoid grading from a narrowed perspective. Moreover, to ease the test anxiety, I allow some flexibility on exam questions. For example, each test in intermediate microeconomics consists of six short concept questions and four longer essay questions but students are only asked to answer five and three, respectively. Throughout the semester, I further aid my commitment to clear expectations by regularly supplying two studying tools: reading and study guides.

Reading Guides

One of the biggest challenges I had to face in instructing my first courses was motivating students to read the assigned material ahead of class. I tried a variety of different ways and through trial and error I eventually discovered that providing a list of guiding questions was the most effective method. Ever since, a day or two before each class, I email my students a list of five to ten questions asking that they think about the questions as they prepare for class.

I found that reading guides yield multiple benefits. First and foremost, guiding questions help students contextualize the material. It is easy to sometimes forget that students may lack the context that instructors take for granted after years of training and reiteration. A paper that an instructor reads with comprehension in an hour, a student may be unable to comprehend in a weekend. The list reduces this difference by providing students with a framework into which they can fit the new material. Second, reading questions provide a benchmark against which students can assess their comprehension and therefore help students guide progress and adjust efforts accordingly. Third, there is a meta-organizational benefit as the email containing the reading guide reminds students to prepare for class and ensures that all students are on the same page, literally.

Study Guides

For similar reasons, I also provide students with a study guide before each exam. I began to write study guides after I noticed noticing that many students repeatedly underperform on the tests. I am convinced that the vast majority is smart enough to master any college class. Yet, they often fail to do so. I suspect that for most of them the explanation lies in a lack of confidence, which results in task avoidance and other painful forms of procrastination. I believe that making sure that students know exactly what to do in order to pass the exam dramatically mitigates this problem. My study guides usually constitute of a long list of questions and practice problems. For example, in intermediate microeconomics a typical study guide contains of about thirty practice problems. When its time to write the exam, I select six of them as templates for exam questions. I also explain to students that this is how I write exams and I assure them repeatedly that anyone who learns to solve all the study guide questions will have no problem succeeding on the exam.

So far, I have noticed three major benefits of providing a study guide. First, it saves students time otherwise spent on guesswork regarding what might be on the exam. Second, using study guides allows me to ask more challenging questions while obtaining superior grade distributions than I did in the classes with no study guide and easier questions. I attribute this to the fact that, similar to reading guides, study guides provide a comprehension measurement benchmark. Third, study guides encourage collaborative learning. They are a focal point around which study groups emerge. Few things are more rewarding than to see a group of students in a coffee shop or at the library involved in an agitated discussion, sparked by a study guide problem they are trying to solve.

Intellectual Openness

One of the key moments in my development as an economics instructor came as I was grading paper drafts submitted by my second development class. At that time I realized that my role is not to teach but to help learn, and that learning is a collaborative, generative process. Before that I expected that I could learn from my students as much as they could learn from me. However, I did not anticipate that mentoring undergraduate research meant being engaged in a learning process that not only transferred knowledge but also generated new ideas and deepened comprehension. I finally understood what my dissertation advisor meant by saying that leading a classroom is much more like playing first violin in a jazz band, not conducting an orchestra.