

Statement of Teaching Philosophy Robert Mayo

My goal as a teacher is to guide my students to a new way of thinking.

A student who amasses a large body of facts in a course will be able to answer the questions posed by the instructor. But if learning is limited to the accumulation of data, then the student will be unable to answer new questions outside the confines of that classroom. Preparing students to answer questions that I did not ask, perhaps that I never thought of, requires that they see the interconnections and relationships between the otherwise isolated islands of facts.

My method to instill this understanding is to lead my students through a coherent story across a semester. Like any good story, each chapter must be connected and relevant to the next and so advance the plot. In practical terms this means that each time I lecture on a new topic, I begin by showing how the new topic is related to the one before. As an example, when I am teaching econometrics and it is time to lecture on categorical dependent variables, I start by reminding the students of the technique they already learned to deal with categorical independent variables. After giving a few (now) easy examples of dummy variables, I ask “but what if the category is not a predictor, but the thing you want to predict?” This provides both motivation and context for a lesson on logit and probit models. If I presented the lecture without first showing where the topic fit into the larger story, then my students might end up knowing how to use the tool but not when it both should and should not be used.

No matter how well integrated the material is into a cohesive whole, students will not benefit if they are not exposed to it. Attending lecture regularly and reading the assigned materials each week is necessary for students to succeed. From my own undergraduate days I remember the temptation to procrastinate, promising myself that I would study more later. To help my students resist that Siren’s call, I start each lecture with a very short quiz based on the prior lecture and assigned reading. I want to encourage attendance and contemporaneous reading, but at the same time I understand that even the most diligent student has a life outside of my class. To provide a reasonable degree of flexibility, I drop the two lowest quiz grades. This way students can use their own judgement about whether missing a lecture (and quiz) is justified by the circumstances. This also has the advantage of avoiding the sometimes contentious discussion of what constitutes a “good” excuse.

Measuring outcomes is critically important for two reasons. First, frequent observation of students’ progress through quizzes and the less frequent exams allows for early intervention if a student is having trouble. A modest problem can trigger a self-reinforcing cycle of discouragement, avoidance, and failure. By the time a major exam occurs the damage may be irreversible, in the extreme case due to a student giving up and withdrawing from the class. But if the initial problem had been detected promptly, a relatively small amount of additional help might have kept the student on a path to success.

The second reason why measuring outcomes is so important is because I cannot improve as a teacher unless I know where I am having trouble as well. When I ask “are there any questions?”

and hear no response, it may be because I explained the material well and all my students understand it. It may also be because I explained the material poorly and they don't want to admit that they are lost. Frequent observations of what students are learning lets me correct course rapidly and also hopefully learn how to be a better teacher next time. As a new teacher, I frequently view myself as a learner along with my students.

I have had very good fortune as a teacher. First, I discovered that I enjoy teaching when not everyone does. I have had the privilege of teaching a very diverse group of students ranging from community college where some are unsure if success in higher education is possible for them, to graduate students at a research university who assume success is the natural order of things. Each has its unique rewards, but I find my greatest satisfaction comes from helping one student succeed when they doubted that they could.