Writing a teaching philosophy at this incipient point in my academic career is not an easy task. I have had the great opportunity to teach courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels at Brandeis and Harvard. My teaching concentration so far has been in econometrics, macroeconomics and finance, with an emphasis on international topics, but I am not afraid to broaden my responsibilities. Let me share with you some of my thoughts on teaching.

My first objective as a teacher is to help my students learn the fundamental content of the course I teach. I start my course-planning stage by carefully determining what the learning outcomes are. I talk to my “up-stream” colleagues to figure out what prior knowledge my students should have from prerequisite courses. I also do a diagnostic test in the first week of class to make sure students have retained this knowledge. I discuss with “down-stream” colleagues what skills they expect students to have coming in after taking my class. I think hard about how to structure the material and how to present it in an accessible way. I strive to give a lot of examples, because the more personal and practical a lesson is, the more memorable. One technique that has worked well is drawing a concept map on the board to show the relationship among concepts. Not surprisingly, my economics students respond particularly well to graphical tools, so in addition to explaining ideas analytically, I always try to tell my story with a picture.

As a new teacher, one of the challenges I have faced is how to keep students engaged. The MBA classes I taught for three years at Brandeis were fairly large, with a lot of professionals taking the course in the evening after working the whole day. It has not always been easy to keep them interested. Staying upbeat and positive has been part of the solution. Asking the students a lot of questions and punctuating theory with discussions has been another. A mentor of mine once told me, “If it takes a head-stand to wake them up, do it.” I have not gone there just yet, but I do try to use humor, short ice-breakers, and “voting” on likely causes or resolutions of a problem to boost attention. I regularly assign in-class readings of short newspaper articles or have my students solve problems during class, either by themselves or in small groups. I often do “competitions” among groups to harness their competitive streak.

Something I have found particularly effective to pique interest in my MBA classes is to ask my students to come up with applications of what they have learned in class to their professional life. I have been amazed at the innovative and diverse uses students come up with. A group of my Econometrics students at Harvard developed a pairs-trading strategy for stocks in the S&P1500 that they later used to start a hedge fund. Another group explored the determinants of households’ satisfaction with life using the German Socioeconomic Panel and applied this in a marketing company. A third group looked at what factors determine whether families in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India choose to send their daughters to school. These students went on to share their results with a non-profit organization whose goal is to increase literacy among women in India.

This “applications” exercise illustrates one way I try to implement my second fundamental objective as a teacher: to help my students develop meta-skills that they can apply in future
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studies or outside of the classroom. To teach them how to find primary sources of information, organize their arguments and deliver criticism in a constructive way, I hold in-class debates on current topics related to the material. For example, in my International Monetary Economics class, my students argued over the sustainability of the US current account deficit and the role of China in the financial crisis of 2007-2008. In my Econometrics classes I assign open-ended group projects to teach valuable skills such as how to sift through vast amounts of data, come up with testable hypotheses and use econometric models to test them. The students have to collaborate with each other, write a short, coherent summary of their results and deliver a presentation before their peers in class.

Since students retain mostly what we examine, I test on applying abstract concepts to real-world situations. In my Econometrics classes, my exams are based on the results of an actual empirical study. I present my students with a table of results similar to what they would find in any empirical academic paper. I do ask them some challenging technical questions, but ultimately the core of my exam tests how well they are able to summarize the results, to interpret them critically and to identify threats to the internal and external validity of the study.

As a teacher, one has a fiduciary duty to their students to challenge them out of their comfort zones, so that they learn, but to do so in a safe and thoughtful way, recognizing how cultural differences can shape our perceptions and attitudes. On a personal level, what teaching means to me is both an opportunity to share what I know and to (hopefully) help my students develop into more mature and responsible adults. Through the eyes of my students, I learn new ways to look at economic concepts. Sometimes from the interaction with my students, I even receive inspiration for my scholarly work. I have learned a lot from my teaching experiences and enjoyed them very much, but of course I realize I have a lot more to learn as a teacher. I am looking forward to pursuing this career further in your institution.