

REINVIGORATING THE PASSION FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE FIELD OF ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to share the author's personal experience in teaching economics especially on the importance of recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of each student and tailoring teaching approaches to suit their individual needs. It discusses effective teaching techniques, motivation and a caring disposition to promote not only good results, but also a joy for learning and a sense of purpose and personal achievement among students. By putting in that extra effort, learning and progressing with the students and showing a genuine care for them, teachers will also be rewarded not only with good grades, but also a deeper passion for teaching and a more personal relationship with the students which will last beyond the duration of the course.

Keywords: Begin with the End in mind, Disciplined, Motivation, Improvement and not perfection, Self-worth, Awareness, Building up.

INTRODUCTION

Educators contribute to the betterment of society by instilling in students the desire to study with a sense of purpose, to be aware of their social responsibilities and be inspired to contribute positively to the society. Stephen Covey advocates '*Begin with the End in mind*' as having the end in mind and working towards the goal is the key to success (Covey, 1989). To instill in the students the desire to study, they need to be made aware of the relevance of the subjects in their lives and the role they play in that field. In this paper the author would wish to share her experience in fostering passion in learning amongst the students and how to sustain the passion in teaching. This will be mainly based on the author's personal experience in teaching economics to the Cambridge A-Level, Monash University Foundation Year (MUFY), Diploma and Degree students.

REINVIGORATING THE PASSION IN LEARNING AMONGST THE STUDENTS

A conducive classroom environment is vital to foster passion for learning amongst the students. The author would first share about how to ensure students are attentive during lessons, followed by how to strengthen their examination techniques and create awareness of their roles.

1. Set the Boundaries – State the Rules

For learning to be effective, students must be able to learn with minimal disturbance in the classroom. A disciplined class allows students to better understand concepts and learn new

theories. To ensure students do not cause disruption in the class, it is important to always lay down the rules during the first lesson – be punctual, be prepared, be responsive, switch off hand-phones, be responsible and be caring. It is especially rewarding to always use positive reinforcement.

Students who use hand-phones or talk loudly in the class are normally self centered and do not respect their teacher or others. They will not benefit much from attending the class with such attitude. When this attitude is carried on to later life to society, it becomes a stumbling block to their career advancement and at the same time, brings down the name of the college.

Dr. James Dobson, an expert in bringing up disciplined children, emphasized that when boundaries are set, children will be happier because they know they are safe as long as they are within those boundaries (Dobson, 2001). The same applies to the students. Being disciplined does not mean being tensed. A disciplined but relaxed environment definitely promotes effective learning.

2. Know the Students by Names

Capturing the students' attention in the first lesson is crucial to ensure success in achieving the goal. The best connection between people is to address them by their names. One useful method is to memorize at least ten names from a group of new students before meeting them, and during the class, call their names and connect their specific features so as to remember them rapidly.

There are many programs on how to remember names. Mind Tools™, for example, suggests association with features of the face as one technique to improve memory. One other technique is to connect to something we are familiar with. A name such as 'Mei Li' sounds like Mary and special feature from her could be identified to connect to the song 'Mary has a little lamb' so that her name could be remembered immediately.

When students' names are called and eye contacts are made during the first lesson itself, the class is normally attentive, not only those whose names are called, but also those who anticipate their names to be called. Quoting Dale Carnegie (1990) "*...a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language.*" The author finds it fruitful to be able to call all the students by names within the first two weeks of the lesson.

3. Gauge their Strength and Weakness

Soon after the first lesson, a small test is carried out to gauge the students' individual level of skill – the command of English, the ability to express, the level of knowledge and their career direction. Through this test, students can be separated into groups with or without language deficiency; with elementary level or advanced level of knowledge; with clear direction or still searching for direction.

Plain and simple English is used for students with language deficiency. They need explanations on the meaning of difficult words or phrases. For example, the word "Scarcity" could be mistaken to have the same meaning as the word 'scare'. For this group

of students, other than economic concepts, they need guidance on grammar as well as sentence structures so that they are encouraged to improve themselves.

Consistently there are students with a good command of English but cannot handle their multiple choice paper well. For example, the CIE A-Level Paper 3 consists of a 30 multiple choice questions test (MCQ) on advanced knowledge level. They need personal coaching by going through individual question to identify and resolve their problems. Normally there are two answers which are totally irrelevant and two answers which are very likely. Students tend to be non-specific or vague with their theory or concept so that they often get into trouble with MCQ where precision is required.

According to the Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) model of communication, students delete, distort and generalize differently. So it is important for teachers to help students check their 'filtering system'. Students who have a good command of English may become 'overconfident', leading them to misread the question and answer the question incorrectly. This could be due to 'distortion' that causes them to manipulate their perceptions of reality. For this group of students, they are made to identify the key words, the connection between these key words and what is actually required of them.

Generalization is how students take one incident and make it into a lifetime experience. If they have had one bad encounter, they may tend to believe that they are not good at a particular field. It is important to always use positive words to encourage and motivate them in every aspect of their studies – ability to learn, to perform well in examinations, to be successful in life and to pursue their dreams.

For students with advanced level of knowledge and clear direction, they are encouraged to pursue in depth knowledge and to further equip themselves for the future. Good reading materials are introduced to them, for example, books such as *'Globalization and its Discontent'*. If it is in their interest, they are encouraged to further pursue their studies in Economics. It is interesting to engage this group of students in more advanced discussions on economic issues.

Where diagrams are concerned, students need to be guided step by step. For example, when drawing market structure for 'monopoly', they need to pay attention to the labels on each axis. The diagram starts with the downward sloping demand curve and marginal revenue (MR) which lies below the demand curve but is half way in between. Marginal cost (MC) is then added and we need to highlight that whenever MC intersects MR, that is the profit maximization point and that is the quantity a monopolist would produce. Students need to realize 'why the price is higher than the MC'. The important idea that students always miss out would be that $MC=MR$ happens in the elastic portion of the demand curve and this is where they must recall the link between total revenue and elasticity.

Generally, students are not specific with drawing diagrams whether they belong to the weaker group or the stronger group. As a precautionary step, it is effectual to ensure every student draws diagrams in the class regularly. Mr. Toru Kumon and Mr. Glenn Doman, who are experts on learning, believe in short but repetitive practices to enhance achievements.

4. Boost Students' Confidence with Examination Techniques

Good grades in examinations are always an incentive and motivation for both students and teachers. This is greatly enhanced by proper examination techniques.

The best way to internalize knowledge is by practicing questions and application. Being familiar with examination formats and requirements boost both confidence and results. The creator of MindPlanning®, Mr. Chris Cain said something to this effect: sitting for examination is like a man driving a car. If he goes through all the theory of driving including how to start the engine, when to press the pedal and how to turn the steering wheel, without going through the actual driving, he is unlikely to be able to drive. So for him to be able to drive, he must actually be driving on the road. The same applies to examinations. Using his idea, the author has been making her students practice in the class by writing essays within the set time. Some may think this is a waste of time. It is definitely NOT as many students do not actually do their homework within the set time.

Paper 4 of the A-Level Economics requires students to answer one data response (about 5 short questions), two essays that sometimes come in 4 parts carrying a total of 50 marks. This has to be done within 2 hours and 15 minutes. Without constant practice in class, many students will either not be able to complete data response or miss at least one part of the essay.

An effective teaching method is to start a topic by giving students all the theory they need to learn pertaining to that topic, with the goal of learning set before them. A list of past-year questions on that topic is shown to give them an idea of how that topic will be examined. One question is chosen, keywords and outline are discussed. Finally, the students must write within the time limit and pass up immediately.

Questions for mock examinations should be totally new. All the data response in CIE A-Level Economics P2 and P4 come from current issues two years back. Suitable articles for mock examination purpose can be looked up from magazines such as *The Economist* from about two years back. The author believes that by setting questions on par with the standard of CIE and by giving them new questions, students will be better prepared to face unfamiliar questions in the final examination.

Through the in-class-practice sessions, various weaknesses among the students are identified. For example, poor command in English language or lack of practice and inability to complete the essay within the stipulated time. To overcome these, the author holds extra essay writing classes to help the students overcome their problem areas. So far, with the students in Sunway College Johor Bahru, it has been 100% passes with good grades both in the MUFY and the A-Level examinations. For the Victoria University Microeconomics paper, a 100% pass rate was achieved using a similar method.

Another good practice adopted by the author is that after each test, but before giving out the test results, students are told – ‘a test is just for you to find out what you do not know yet so that you can improve on it’. It is important for students to have the right attitude towards tests so that they are neither discouraged by poor results nor become overconfident because of good results. As for lecturers, we should always aspire for improvement and not expect perfection. Learning is a process and every time after a test, it is a good chance for us to reflect and readjust so that we can help the students learn better and improve.

5. Create Awareness of Their Roles in the Economy

Economics starts with scarcity of resources – this is the starting point for the students to see their contribution to economic growth and how their productivity affects the performance of

a country. Being aware of their contributions to the economy, it instills in them the value of their existence. A student who has a good sense of self-worth will tread his life with diligence and confidence.

Under the topic of externality, issues of smoking, crime, HIV and more are purposefully brought to their attention. These topics allow them to explore and realize the implications and consequence of each individual's actions; how resources are wasted when society has to tackle all the consequences of negative externalities and the reality of opportunity cost to every resource they possess, including time.

Students are also consistently reminded to care for their friends. Students have the habit of signing the attendance sheet on behalf of their friends even when their friends are absent. They perceive this to be 'caring'. However, when it comes to notes or handouts, they do not ask for extra copies for their friends. They need to realize that true caring is to help their friends on matters pertaining to their studies but signing on behalf (cheating) is not. Everyone must be responsible for their own lives and that includes coming to lecture and signing their own attendance. Everyone should care for their friends in positive ways that help them improve their studies and personalities.

By instilling in them the right sense of responsibility for their own lives and a sense of caring for others, they will bring this value into their work place and contribute positively to society. After all, what is the ultimate aim of education if not to be of service to society?

6. Make Economic Issues Relevant to the Students

Passion normally starts with interest. Interest can be developed if students see the relevance of economic issues in their lives. For example, in 2005, when Malaysia unpegged the ringgit to US dollars, it was timely for discussing the topic on exchange rate system. In 2008, petrol price that went up to RM2.90/liter was an appropriate contributor to the topic of inflation and government intervention. Recently, the dispersal of RM60billion stimulus package is an excellent case study for fiscal policy.

We can use daily issues in the newspapers to help students see how practical and useful the subject of economics is, and at the same time encourage them to read the newspapers, be aware of events in the country and in the world. When they are aware, they will care, and they will think. When they think, they need tools to help them analyze and this is where they can apply their knowledge of economics. As they enquire further, they will realize how interesting and useful the subject of economics is and soon they will learn the subject with deep interest and that is what we call passion!

REINVIGORATING THE PASSION IN TEACHING AMONGST THE TEACHERS

To develop passion in the process of learning amongst the students, we must first be passionate in the process of teaching. Leadership by example is always true. This has to start from a heart that cares:-

1. Genuinely Care for the Students – Good Life Style

Caring for students include caring for their studies and examinations as well as their well-being. Mother Teresa said: **‘If we want a love message to be heard, it has got to be sent out. To keep a lamp burning, we have to keep putting oil in it.’**

Young people like to get together and if they always gather in a healthy environment, exchanging words of encouragement, they would have a healthy social life. Being physically involved in their activities such as joining them for tea, attending their graduation ceremonies or piano performances is a source of encouragement to them. Even when students needed a place to celebrate birthdays, the author opened her home to them.

The author remembers clearly her secondary school Accounting teacher, Mrs. K.T. Teo who cared for her students and used to invite outstation students to her house. The students had lunch and did their homework; they even learnt cooking and baking at her home. Both Mr. and Mrs. Teo welcomed the students with open arms. They imprinted many fond memories of the author’s younger days and she is following their footsteps because they had shown her good deeds by example.

Educators build up students, not give up on any of them. Some students may behave impolitely towards their teachers or classmates. It is better to first assume that they are not aware of their behavior. Most of the time after pointing it out to them, they realize and improve. For example, some students come in to class late and walk in without any sense of guilt. The author would tell them that they ought to apologize for being late. It is interesting to see some of them immediately say sorry. Today, if any of the Diploma students walked in late into the author’s class, their classmates would remind him/her to say sorry. Students must be taught that it is their responsibility to be punctual and that when they are late, they ought to feel sorry so that they would improve on their time management. When they are late, they disrupt the flow of teaching as well as the flow of learning among their classmates.

What is within will radiate outwards. Students can sense a genuine caring disposition easily. Even naughty students are teachable because they can sense the teacher’s reprimand springs from a heart that cares for their well-being. This is an assurance that the teacher’s effort will not go to waste and this is the foundation for dedicated teaching. Some hardcore students may not improve with these admonishments. Being faced with this group of students, the author would remind herself of the following verse from the Bible:-

‘Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up’ Galatians 6:9.

Sometimes through a student’s writings, we can catch a glimpse of his/her life and daily activities. Once a student in answering the question of whether a jobless man faces the problem of scarcity, he wrote “...this man would go about the park naked and he would rob the shops nearby...”. The author suspected this student must spend most of his time playing computer games and no other activities and he confirmed it.

Students who spend most of their time playing computer games will suffer in the long run, as they forgo normal social life with people around them. They are physically not active and most input of their brains come from motion-intensive computer games which are mostly unhealthy, violent, distorted and unrealistic. For these students, they need encouragement to get involved in more interactive social activities and occasionally be

checked for their participation. World renowned peace activist and ex-president of Stanford University, Dr. David Starr Jordan said *“There is no real excellence in all this world which can be separated from right living.”*

2. Keep Learning and Improving

“He who dares to teach must never cease to learn”. This is quoted from a poster hung on the wall in the Degree and Diploma Department in Sunway College, Johor Bahru.

The joy of teaching streams from the confidence of the knowledge we have in the subject. Economic theories are vast and economic issues are dynamic and new every day. Examination questions are modified and new concepts may be incorporated into each sitting. So, as teachers, we need to always update ourselves, learn and progress together with the students.

Students come to college with minds that are conditioned to learn. It is then our challenge to make them interested in the subjects we are teaching. In the subject of Economics, the author continuously learn how to gauge their standard, how to tailor her teaching methods and how to bridge their knowledge to the relevance of daily life.

After completing a lesson, the author reviews her teaching method and looks for areas of improvement. If a student asks a question which the author does not have a ready answer, she will tell him her limitation and she will get back to him as soon as possible. Thus, for the author to keep learning, she needs to continuously upgrade her knowledge in Economics as well as her techniques in teaching.

To keep abreast with economic development, the author reads widely and tries to attend lectures related to economic issues such as the Khazanah Global Lecture by Professor Stiglitz. In her effort to become a better teacher, the author seeks to attend training such as workshops on the CIE examinations, The Mind Planning Process, Multiple Intelligence and Learning Styles. She also consistently reads books that enhance her knowledge in both economics and teaching.

Lecture notes help students to have a comprehensive overview of the subject matter. A-Level Economics by CIE is designed for a two years course. Students in the college have less than two years to complete their syllabus and coupled with other subjects they are studying, they are constrained by time factor. So, the author thinks it is important to give them lecture notes.

The author’s lecture notes include theory and examples so that students can understand each concept well and they are better able to answer questions in essay form. At the same time, the sentences are numbered for easy reference. During the lecture hours, students may be writing notes that deviate from the actual concept. A complete set of lecture notes will be a basis for them to compare and correct themselves. The students are encouraged to read text or reference books to enhance their depth of understanding and also to summarize their notes for revision purposes. Indeed, by writing lecture notes, it enhances one’s knowledge and for any concept that the writer is not sure of, she may research and discuss with her colleagues. This is an effective way to keep learning.

A challenging thought to put across here is that teachers could conduct group teaching as a way to upgrade themselves. When three or four teachers take turns to conduct teaching to the same group of students at the same time, teachers can observe and learn from one

another and continue to improve individually. Students can feedback on an approach suitable for their learning style which can be valuable to help teachers tailor their teaching methods. Knowledge is meant for sharing. Without sharing of knowledge, mankind cannot progress.

3. Stay Healthy – Physically and Mentally

To teach effectively and energetically, teachers must stay healthy. Good health is the foundation for daily activity. To stay physically healthy, it is a common knowledge that we must eat well and exercise regularly. To keep her mind and body healthy, the author practices Taiji - the Ancient Chinese Exercise.

To stay mentally healthy, we must manage our stress level. Exercise helps to reduce stress to a large extent. Dale Carnegie's book titled *'How to Stop Worrying and Start Living'* has helped the author pulls through many stressful times in her life (Carnegie, 1990).

Being associated with people who are positive and motivated in teaching invigorates the passion in us. The author is in contact with one such person from Victoria University, Melbourne. She came from a communist country at the age of about forty and had to learn English and Economics from scratch. She toiled and strived very hard to a point when she nearly gave up. However, she persevered and today she is an excellent lecturer in Economics with a Doctorate degree. Undoubtedly, this is passion.

In pursuit of our goals, there are times we feel burnt out or discouraged. We should have a colleague or spouse who supports our belief and gives us encouragement. We should also remind ourselves to always look for improvement, not perfection.

4. Organize Extra-curricular Activities for the Students

Organizing extra-curricular activities for the students enhances their learning process. At the same time it keeps us vigilant and passionate in our job. The author started an economic presentation competition to enhance the students' knowledge in economics. Through the competition, students also learnt to research and organize information, they learnt public speaking, presentation skills and more importantly they learnt team work.

Normally in the last lesson before the semester ends, the author gives the students Economics Cross Word Puzzles Competitions. They enjoy it because they get to practice their knowledge and have some fun at the same time. The author used to organize factory visits to widen the students' exposure as well as to better prepare them for the working environment. Once a brick factory visit cum overnight trip to A-Famosa was organized and it was very rewarding because the author got to know the students in a more personal way besides all the joyful and fun-filled memories.

Through all these activities, a closer relationship that lasts beyond the duration of the course is fostered. After graduation, some students continue to call the author for their gatherings, visit the author and even organize parties in her house!

CONCLUSION – BUILDING UP STUDENTS THROUGH PASSIONATE TEACHING

We may have reservations of our involvement and our activities with students. Will it not be too tired and drained by being so involved? Indeed the more we exercise our muscles, the stronger the muscles become. Quoting from Aristotle: “*We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit*”. The secret to success is no secret. The key to success is to consistently practice what we believe in.

Reinvigorating the passion in teaching and learning stems from a heart that genuinely cares for students. The process of growing and learning together with the students makes the author feel that she is always youthful and useful. With the belief that each of these students will become successful in their own ways and that they will become good young men and women, the author has been motivated to continue upgrading and teaching passionately.

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