

"Ideas Matter: Education as a Means to Promote Social Change"

**The Personal Teaching Philosophy of
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Sometimes I daydream about what Michel Foucault and F.A. Hayek would discuss over dinner. While embedded within seemingly incommensurate intellectual traditions, I suspect that the two theorists would have had a lively conversation regarding the state. Together, these star-crossed thinkers provide a comprehensive vision for how social structures operate. Foucault, a critical historian and theorist, sought to examine the emergence and contours of the carceral state; whereas Hayek, a classical liberal, focused upon the potentials and limits of a free society. Both asserted that knowledge is the essential variable through which to understand social change. In short, knowledge is power and ideas matter. To understand how complex systems operate, the social scientist must focus on how knowledge is produced, distributed, and how feedback is garnered and acted upon.

My teaching philosophy is motivated by this same insight. What is learning, but for a complex process of knowledge production and distribution? To promote more and better learning throughout my intellectual environment, I aim to systematically minimize the obstacles to growing and sharing knowledge. Strict deadlines, rigidly defined paper formats, and formally structured textbooks can all impose unnecessary costs to learning. Students, obsess over obtaining a particular grade instead of critically engaging the material. If Foucault and Hayek were correct, knowledge processes should avoid arbitrary inefficiencies.

Academics frequently identify as either researchers or teachers. I understand research and teaching as complementary rather than adversarial, mainly because I consider myself a conversationalist. I believe that writing is thinking and that the writing process requires commentary and feedback. In this vein, professional academia is an enlivening community. In addition to the opportunities of research, publication, and engagement with like-minded scholars, having a group of students who regularly meet to discuss ideas, constitutes the greatest input into the clarity and quality of my research and publications. Teaching a class is like having a discussion that lasts all semester and I have the privilege to guide its focus.

This process is straightforward: good research means constant reading and writing. When designing my coursework, I structure classes to discuss those puzzles and themes that I struggle with in my own research. To optimize this process further requires one significant variable: the reading and discussion of rigorously argued material. The intellectual community more dedicated to reading and discussion yields better research. Hence my teaching, like my research, fits within the Smithian tradition of economics wherein social progress is a function of social coordination and social coordination is a function of harmonizing the interests of the self with those of the other. I perceive direct benefits from the more books my students read.

Meeting renowned economic historian and social theorist Deirdre McCloskey solidified my educational worldview. Deirdre's research attests that ideas not only matter, they arguably matter most. She has pioneered an innovative research program and theoretical perspective to augment this argument. A longtime critic of statistical formalism and methodological conformity, her latest texts investigate the potentials and limitations of virtue and dignity in bourgeois society. McCloskey surveys across historical times and places, theories and frameworks, cultural and empirical evidence. I

like to think of her work as tuning into the collective wisdom of society so as to let the world reflect and comment upon itself. Everything is evidence, and Deirdre seems to know a significant chunk of it all.

Speaking with Deirdre, for me, was akin to being in the presence of a charismatic secular cleric. In the course of conversation with her, I couldn't escape the visceral reality that she had read more books than I. This is when my teaching philosophy crystallized. At some level one must admit that learning and insight are functions of reading and thinking. For sheer exposure to intellectual material, Deirdre is a valuable resource, but the academic processes of knowledge all begin with books first.

I have resolved the following: if I want to be an effective educator in an environment of engaged and informed students and colleagues, I must focus my efforts to lower the costs and raise the benefits of encouraging students to read critically. If my current colleagues, students and administrators say nothing else of me, I hope that they can state bluntly, "Dan gets people to read books."

In practical terms my strategy has taken many forms. A small but symbolic gesture: my personal office library is freely available for anyone to borrow. If I don't risk losing my own copy of a text, then I likely won't have anyone to talk with about it. No risk, no reward. Secondly, I am a gleeful file sharer. Ideally, knowledge would be free, but in reality, tradeoffs persist. Hard copy texts are expensive. I have digitized the bulk of material on all my syllabi. With lower costs, I indulge a higher quantity demanded. Students now access both source material and contemporary research with the click of a button.

This has allowed my "Principles of Macroeconomics" to simultaneously take a history of thought and a school of thought approach. Students avoid the disservice of treating standard concepts as agreed upon doctrine, and they arguably understand the material better as the result of continual debates and paradigmatic revolutions. From the Ancient Greeks to the current financial crises, we live amidst the rubble of a grand battle between competing ideas.

My honors course, "The Contemporary Culture of Capitalism: A Cost Benefit Analysis," is directly inspired by McCloskey's use of varied cultural products in an effort to recognize how decision makers understand their actions and trade offs. Students are assigned a diverse sample of material from *Robinson Crusoe* to episodes of *The Walking Dead*. Class discussions compare the institutional conditions of various social contexts in theory, history, fiction, film, and current events. This was an infinitely easier format thanks to the technological affordability of shared ideas.

The frontiers of easy library access and Internet availability stop where the inevitable constraints of pecuniary costs begin. Some texts are simply not as accessible as others, but the demands on learning press hard against these budget lines. Thanks to a significant private grant, the simple task of buying and giving books to students has been much easier in recent years. If I perceive students to be unfamiliar with a particular text, and that text is crucial for advancing our conversations, then I simply buy copies and start a reading group. Students feel privileged and honored to be gifted a book directly tailored to their interests and invited to engage on equal terms with fellow faculty readers regarding the topics therein.

Summer lecturing with both the Foundation for Economic Education and The Institute for Humane Studies has taught me; first, the power of free books. And second,

learning is a form of retreat. When done well, it is both fascinating and fun. Such organizations gather faculty from various fields of study related by the theme of Classical Liberalism to investigate topics such as the role of freedom in social change. Interested students travel from around the world to hear lectures, participate in group discussions, and interact within a community of scholarly global citizens.

If capable I would never leave the delightful atmosphere of these summer seminars. I would give away as many books to as many students, friends, and colleagues, as I had time and resources to afford. The tired adage of leading horses to water comes to mind, but has never been a concern. Truth be told, I simply cannot help myself. I am enthusiastic regarding the books I read and the outlooks I formulate from them. Again, I deeply adhere to the fundamental belief that ideas matter. With lots of good ideas in hand and mind, social change can and arguably does follow. To quote Smith, "the rest being brought about by the natural course of things."