

My Teaching Philosophy and Objectives

Sanford V. Berg (February 2008)

I have always believed that good teaching involves concern for individual students. As my own children moved through universities elsewhere, I became even more sensitive to the incredible transition these youth undergo. This new awareness has made me a better listener than I used to be. My office doors are always open to students, and I end up writing recommendations for many undergraduates who feel that I know them well enough to thoughtfully evaluate their past performance and current capabilities. In my classroom, I try to plug into their energy and stimulate undergraduates to achieve their potential. Recent emphasis on teaching MBA courses has given me the opportunity to explore how to reach professionals who are into their careers.

Students can sense when the professor really cares about what occurs within the class setting—whether a traditional classroom or a distance learning situation. My role models at the University of Washington had different styles, but both professors communicated their love of economics. The first, Henry Buechel, taught the large introductory course. Flamboyant, challenging, and passionate, he hooked students by linking concepts to current events. An avowed populist, he made us read a different magazine each week and required regular critical essays. By emphasizing *political* economy, he breathed life into the analytical skeleton of economics.

Jim Crutchfield, my other undergraduate role model, was more of a scholar. He had a deep commitment to identifying the opportunity costs of alternative policies. I can picture him even now, pacing in front of the blackboard, providing eloquent explanations of a wide range of industrial organization phenomenon. He put the muscle and detail on the economic skeleton. I took several courses from him, never tiring of his winning smile or engaging manner. He taught me to avoid getting lost in detail. A particular graph might be scaffolding that is later discarded, but the framework ought to stimulate critical thinking that remains.

I do not try to duplicate either of these mentors, but have adapted what works with my own personality. Since my classes range from twenty to ninety students, I do not have the impact on large numbers (like a Beuchel or Dave Denslow or Mark Rush); like Crutchfield, I build on the foundations laid by others. I try to use humor to keep the pace moving, and my classroom style tends to be high energy. In recent years, I have taken on responsibility for MBA courses in Managerial Economics—on campus and via internet. Both types of courses require careful thought over instructional techniques, cases and examples, and ways to provide individual attention to students. Clearly, new technologies offer great potential for bringing a wide variety of material to the attention of students. For example, the *Body of Knowledge on Infrastructure Regulation* that I helped develop is moving into a second generation—it serves as a resource for my UF course in regulatory economics. Other universities have incorporated the material in their programs. In addition, it will be a platform for in-house training at government agencies and infrastructure operators.

My university courses tend to be relatively rigorous, emphasizing techniques that can improve decision-making. I believe that students leave my classes grounded in principles and

convinced of the applicability of economics to everyday issues. The MBA program has stretched me to keep up-to-date with educational technology and business cases. Beyond campus, my “students” now include more than two thousand regulators and executives from over one hundred and thirty countries touched by outreach activities of the Public Utility Research Center. The *PURC/World Bank International Training Program on Utility Regulation and Strategy* has enabled me to develop programs that complement my academic mission. Exercises developed for outreach find their way into the courses I teach. For example, a benchmarking case gives students an opportunity to evaluate utilities that perform differentially across a range of activities. I continue to enjoy the challenge of linking principles and practice in a way that retains the integrity of the former and the excitement of the latter. Feedback from managers and policy-makers indicates that I am on the right track. I love teaching and try to persuade my “students” to appreciate the importance of economics.