I have had a wide range of teaching experiences so far in my lifetime. My first real job was in high school, teaching elementary and middle school kids how to play soccer at a summer camp. While an undergrad I was a teaching assistant for a number of physics courses, even TAing for my own class once (which was probably not a good idea as the TA seemed to only be knowledgeable on subjects I already understood). I also taught an SAT2 prep course, and worked for two semesters as a special education aide at a high school. As a graduate student I’ve TAed a number of graduate and undergraduate courses, I’ve taught a class with 150 students, and one with 20. As a post doc I taught an upper-division experimental economics course. Through these diverse experiences I’ve learned a great deal, and yet each new experience seems to teach me something new.

I learned my first lesson teaching those kids how to play soccer; the lesson: “Don’t expect immediate results.” Despite my best efforts, at the end of a one week session, most of the kids still weren’t ready to play in the World Cup. I try to apply a less cynical version of this lesson to teaching economics. “Be patient.” Even if you can’t turn a C student into an A student in the span of a semester, that doesn’t mean you can’t try to teach that student the skills he or she needs to eventually become an A student.

As an undergrad assisting in a physics lab for pre-medical students, I learned a second vital lesson: “Pre-medical students usually don’t care about physics lab.” This came as quite the shock at the time as I had no idea why anyone wouldn’t love physics labs. I’m not sure if this lesson is entirely applicable as an econ professor, but fortunately, after assisting in the same lab for physics majors the following semester, I was able to generalize the lesson as follows: “Majors and non-majors often have vastly different interest levels in the subject matter.” This generalization can apply well to economics, particularly when looking at the various business majors, but I would soon generalize this lesson even further.

While working as a special education aide, I generalized the previous lessons to the following: “Every student is different.” It probably doesn’t seem like a shocking revelation but it is important to recognize that even when teaching the same material, differences in students’ interest level, competence, and future goals can render experiences from previous classes useless. For example, undergraduate business students at the University of Arizona are required to take intermediate microeconomics, but few ever go on to take an upper division economics course. This means their needs and interests as students are fundamentally different than econ majors who will be using intermediate concepts in many of their upper division courses. So, in designing a course for business majors at the U of A, it makes sense to reduce the number of topics covered, to spend more time on the remaining topics, and to integrate more concrete examples from everyday life, and the business world. Otherwise, the material will essentially go to waste as students will have great difficulty applying the tools they have learned.

During my graduate career I have learned a great deal about teaching specific economic ideas. I’ve learned a number of specific classroom techniques (some more effective than others), and I’ve had the opportunity to test some of my own ideas in the classroom. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned came from teaching in a large auditorium. In a class that large it becomes very difficult to get all students involved. It is also very difficult to tailor material to the students’ interests as there are simply too many conflicting opinions on what is interesting. To solve these problems I try to apply the lesson: “Divide and conquer.” In this context it means breaking the class into groups (even groups of one when applicable) and allowing them some freedom to direct their own learning. An in class presentation that can be on a topic of their choosing (or chosen from an approved list) is one option. Another is a series of short “comments” on news articles that aren’t as daunting as a research paper, but allow you to gauge where students are at as if they had answered questions in class.
As a post doc I learned how rewarding it can be to teach an upper division course in my field of interest, where my personal expertise can go far beyond what is in any textbook. When teaching this course I took a multi-stage approach to the class structure. The first third of the course involved teaching students the basics of the discipline, in this case the scientific method and how it applies to economic theory. The second third involved applying these basics by reading and analyzing a scholarly paper. The last third was devoted to incorporating the students’ knowledge and creativity into a proposal of their own research idea. I believe this type of structure was very successful for an upper-division undergraduate or graduate level course.

As far as general teaching goes, I keep my classroom atmosphere light by using humor, relevant by discussing current events, and consistent by setting and keeping clear expectations. Clarity and consistency are important because they reduce rent seeking behavior. I believe the goal of an introductory course is to generate excitement about the material, the goal of an intermediate class is to provide a solid theoretical foundation, and the goal of a terminal course is to teach how to apply theory in the real world. Additionally, all courses regardless of level should reinforce good learning habits that can contribute to students’ future endeavors regardless of career field.

As for economics specifically, I prefer to emphasize that it is generally the study of decision making, and not just about business and profit. This tends to help students with varying interests connect to the material. Everyone has experience making decisions, and will need to make decisions in the future. So I try to show students that rational decision making can help them solve everyday problems, even if being rational isn’t always easy. I also try to emphasize that economics is an evolving field and that most of the theories presented in class have significant limitations. This both serves to motivate students who are interested in pursuing economics as a career, and to help students square abstract theories with the real world scenarios they model.

As an instructor, I try to improve every time I teach, using the little lessons learned from previous classes. Perhaps, if I can improve enough, one day, one of my students will take my class and go on to play in the World Cup… and be able to calculate the profit maximizing price for a ticket while he’s at it.