

Exemplary Teaching Practices and Philosophies

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I teach managers and managers-to-be. My students are people who lead or will lead food and agribusiness firms in the future. The food and agribusiness markets my students operate in are evolving rapidly. Consolidation, changing consumer preferences, emerging technology, globalization, and a shifting role for government, among other factors, are reshaping traditional markets and market relationships. Making good decisions in this dynamic setting is a demanding task. I view my role as a teacher as one of doing all that is in my influence help my students, whether they be managers or undergraduates, develop the critical thinking, analytical, communication, and managerial capabilities it will take to be successful in the current and future food and agribusiness markets.

Given this context, my basic teaching philosophy is to strike a balance between theory/concept and application in a highly interactive learning environment. Three elements are very important to me – theory/concept, relevance, and engagement.

I believe that effective teaching starts with a solid foundation of theory and concept. As students deal with the complexities of real world decisions, they need a set of mental models to be effective at framing issues and to begin the process of developing solutions. In my field, economic theory provides an excellent starting point. But, conceptual frameworks from the management and marketing literature are also important. In addition, because decisions made by food and agribusiness firms affect both individuals and society, ideas from diverse areas including interpersonal communications and ethics become important.

I believe that students deserve relevance in the classroom. It is not enough to have useful theories and conceptual frameworks. Providing students with examples which allow them to see these theories and frameworks in practice helps students make the mental jump from classroom to marketplace. Putting ideas into context can fire the imagination of a student as they take an example I might provide and search out their own applications.

I believe in engagement, whether in a traditional face-to-face educational setting, or in a distance-delivered course. Management is hard, and there is nothing easy about making effective decisions. I want students immersed in the material, wrestling with the concepts at hand, looking for ways to put them to work in a relevant exercise. In the classroom, I want to facilitate and coach instead of lecture. I want students discussing and debating instead of copying down notes. On-line, in a distance course, I want students using discussion boards and other technology as they develop thoughtful responses to a case assignment and interact with their peers, instead of drafting rote answers to generic end of chapter questions.

For me, there is nothing as professionally satisfying as leaving a classroom or a distance education unit here all of these elements – theory/concept, relevance, and engagement – have come together in a dynamic interaction leaving students buzzing among each other about the topic of the day. It doesn't happen during every session/unit, but it is surely a goal I aspire toward. However, I also know that these same three elements can come together during all of those teachable moments outside the classroom – during office hours, working on a student business plan competition project, or thinking about an internship offer. Great teachers, like great entrepreneurs, are always looking for the opportunity.