Integrating teaching and research
Andrew Mearman, University of the West of England, Bristol

It is often difficult to strike the correct balance between teaching and research and to integrate the two. However, it is possible: one's research can be affected by one's teaching. For instance, it is often true that having to teach a concept forces one to understand it better than before; it is at this point that an anomaly in the theory or evidence appears as a research avenue.

It is also beneficial when one can introduce one's own research into the teaching process. It is beneficial, because the research brings alive the subject under study, not least because the enthusiasm of the tutor transmits to the students. Of course, the extent to which one can introduce research findings into teaching is limited by the focus of one's research: it may only be applicable to upper level undergraduate or postgraduate modules. I have four main research interests: the philosophy and methodology of economics; the teaching of economics; economics and the environment; and economics and sport. I have been fortunate to be able to introduce significant amounts of my research into my teaching.

One of my main interests is how economists think. That manifests in my teaching in many ways. For example, I encourage students to think comparatively about problems, to contrast views, and to reach positions of their own. At this point, my research interests on thinking and on teaching overlap to affect curriculum and assessment design. I assess students in a variety of ways, taking into account different ways of thinking. I stress verbal as well as technical skills. I make students aware of their use of language. This is most easy to do at postgraduate level, wherein the students can examine the arguments behind such an approach, but it is also valuable to undergraduates.

Aside from that philosophical work and its affects on my teaching are more traditional ways of introducing research into teaching. My own work on mixing of methods in economics illuminates discussion on choice of methods for research. I use these as case studies with which to teach to postgraduate research methods students. Similarly, my own use of questionnaires in research can be used to demonstrate some of the principles of those methods, as well as their pitfalls. Finally, the results from those studies can affect teaching. For example, my research into sports participation indicates strongly that no one economic theory of behaviour can explain the decision to participate in sport. I use that research to illustrate the problems of single theories; and to discuss the economics of choice. If sport participation seems to be affected by a broad range of factors including price, age, social group, and physiological and psychological drivers, students can be asked how useful a single theory of rational choice is to explaining behaviour. That is a useful exercise in critical thought and in understanding models and modelling.
Good research and good teaching go together, I think, not primarily because one influences the other, but because both are driven by enthusiasm for the subject. Economics is not a body of truths or results to be memorized and reproduced, but a way of thinking about questions and a body of tools and methods that can be applied to problems. It is not something you learn and then know, but something you learn how to do. Our primary aim as teachers should be to get our students to think like economists, which means to think like researchers in economics, even if they can only apply their skills to simpler problems. Teachers who can put that across are likely to want to do it themselves, and active researchers will want to convey the excitement of the subject to others.

It is admittedly rare to be able to give students one's own research papers to read. A paper aimed at a professional journal is, after all, a rather artificial form aimed at an audience of fellow specialists who are familiar with the basic ideas but need to be convinced, in detail, about relatively minor pints of novelty, about the exact way data is handled, the econometric techniques used, and so on. But that does not mean that research cannot feed, really quite directly, into teaching. The issues and the basic ideas are often accessible even to first or second year students. It is possible to discuss how the literature has evolved, what the problems are, what kind of evidence is relevant, and what sort of conclusions emerge. Even when it comes to lecturing to beginners on basic economics, an active researcher still has an insight into the process of research, the way to think about problems, and so on, which can be drawn on for examples. It is not a question of deliberately and artificially dragging your own research into the teaching - rather, the research is part of the background that you draw on, along with other people’s research, the results of reading the current journals, attending research seminars, and so on.

My own position in recent years has been rather untypical, in that my current research focuses on the history of economic ideas. (I was a more mainstream teacher and researcher for years before that.) My research consists centrally of reading and thinking - reading and re-reading the work of past economists, reading the secondary literature about them and reading other writers (not necessarily economists) who provide the intellectual context to their work. For the course I teach on the History of Economic Thought, the ideal preparation is precisely to read the original works, the secondary literature, and so on. The two overlap almost completely, in a way that work in more technical areas probably does not. Of course, what I say in the lectures is often well known (to scholars, not to the students), while what I publish has to focus on what others have missed or (in my opinion) got wrong. But I am sure I do a better job in teaching about people who I have done research on than on those who I have not. I know the material better, I am more confident in handling and presenting it, I have a clearer feel for what is important, and so on. (Some of) my research feeds pretty directly into (some of) my teaching. I also find that teaching - explaining, answering questions, following up references of one sort or another - often generates ideas for research and (I hope) prevents me from getting the narrow tunnel-vision which is the occupational disease of the specialized researcher.
Should Research Infect Teaching in Economics?
Prof. Monojit Chatterji, University of Dundee

Research and teaching are the two core functions of most academics. In Economics there is a long tradition of individual academics wearing two separate and distinct hats to perform these two functions. In other Social Sciences and Humanities subjects, the distinction appears more blurred. Academics in these fields do appear to carry their research into the classroom, especially when teaching advanced undergraduates. Why does this phenomenon not percolate so much in Economics?

There are a number of reasons why this might be the case. The first is that unlike our cousins in other Social sciences and Humanities, Economics has a very large and growing core material which is increasingly quantitative in nature. By the time we have finished teaching this core material there is less space to deal with field specialisations which are the most likely courses in which personal research can infiltrate teaching. The second factor is the quantitative nature of economics research. This obviously presents another barrier to presentation of research material as an integral part of a teaching programme.

It must surely be true that teaching one's own research in an accessible way is a highway to enthusing students and enhancing the classroom experience for both teacher and student. In this context it must be remembered that academic research is not the only research we do. Some of us are also engaged in more policy-based research for government and other agencies. This research may be more easily accessible to students since its conception and delivery is already aimed at non-economists.

It is also true that academic research can sometimes be simplified down to make it more accessible to students. For example, using general functional forms in the construction of an economic model can be replaced by special cases which are analytically easier to solve. Similarly some applied econometric work can also be explained in a heuristic but reasonably convincing manner. Indeed, one pedagogic advantage of taking this approach to bringing research into class, is that it can be used to explain to students why quantification is important. In the final analysis, the great gain of bringing research into class is that the teacher is expositing work he or she owns, and knows intimately and believes to be important. From the student's perspective, the sense of satisfaction that comes from knowing that they are operating close to the frontier must be exhilarating. So let's not be too shy or too modest and start infecting our students with our research!

Combining Research and Teaching
Todd R. Kaplan, University of Exeter

Every day, a lecturer feels pulled in many different directions and spread too thin among responsibilities, the main two being research and teaching (not to mention administration duties, student advising, referee reports and, god forbid, personal life).

It is clear that we got our jobs due to our research abilities. It is also clear that promotions and monetary compensation is primarily tied to research accomplishments. However, most of us feel a
moral responsibility to our students — they are in fact the reason for the existence of our positions.

Thus, weighing these considerations, we spread our time over our activities like a microeconomics agent with a fixed budget of time treating the activities as substitutes. We judge every hour spent on teaching to be an hour subtracted from research, hurting our career opportunities (and vice-versa). While easy to fall into this way of thinking, I propose that we should also consider the positive spillovers from one activity to the other.

Every hour spent on teaching can improve our research output; every hour spent on research can improve our teaching performance. That is, teaching enhances research and research enhances teaching.

Let me start by explaining **how teaching benefits research.** First, teaching develops communication skills (not often acquired in our quantitative-based graduate programs) and forces us to explain complicated ideas in a simple, organized manner. This is needed for success in writing and presenting research. Second, teaching helps the lecturer learn. The further one moves on the career path, the more specialized one’s research becomes. Teaching helps counter this both by providing an opportunity to keep updated with other fields but — just as important — by helping us fill in the gaps of our knowledge. I often hear that the best way to learn a subject is to teach it. Third, teaching helps us understand our own areas of research. By teaching others, we rethink old problems and perhaps find new areas to apply our research. In summary, we should view teaching less as a chore to be finished than as a chance to hone one’s skills and knowledge.

Let me now explain just **some of the ways research benefits teaching.** First, adding a bit of current research can help spice up lectures and convey to students the usefulness of what they are learning. Economics has an edge over other fields in that current research can easily be put into the classroom. There are current research articles that cover close to every topic in the undergraduate curriculum. This is obviously different from mathematics or physics. Moreover, with Freakonomics, Steven Levitt showed not only that the public — let alone students — find economics research fascinating, but also that research papers can be brought down to a level of easy comprehension.

Second, putting some research into lectures will inspire some students to go into research. Many of us can remember the lecturers that inspired us. For me it was the current research that they put into their lectures. (One of my professors was Richard Feynman, whose *thoughts on research and teaching* are well worth reading). Finally, the research we put into lectures, particularly our own, will increase the respect that the students have for what we do. From this, they would be more willing to pay attention during lectures to grasp the extra insight we may be able to provide even when our communication skills are still being developed.

On a practical level, there are some simple **pointers to combine research and teaching.**

When involved in teaching, constantly try to see any open problems or interesting research questions. Keep changing your lectures- try to find new materials or examples to cover. Even squeeze in some material that you may want refreshing in lectures. When involved in research keep one’s eyes open for ideas to help teaching. Whether or not the idea is suitable, for each seminar you attend and for each research paper you read or write, think about how you would be
able to explain it an undergraduate or graduate student. Ask if there an interesting homework question that can be based upon the work.

Not all is rosy. While it is worthwhile to be involved in both activities and they can provide a break going from one to the other, there are switching costs. Do try to keep a scheduled break to focus on research. I like to keep a day or two open in the week. Furthermore, also save a significant time before each lecture to review material. I find it useful to schedule office hours after teaching. Talking to students helps me wind down from the excitement of lecturing. This is perhaps easy to say than do, but take note of any modifications to material/additional thoughts shortly after the lecture.

When one doesn’t see research and teaching in conflict, one can engage both with a more positive attitude, and students do perceive this. Our jobs should not feel like being a part-time high school teacher and part-time governmental economist. Instead, by looking for ways to combine research and teaching we can truly feel like university lecturers.

**Research and Teaching**

Richard P. Feynman

"The Dignified Professor": excerpts from "'Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman!' Adventures of a Curious Character" by Richard Feynman, Bantam Books: New York, 1986

I don't believe I can really do without teaching. The reason is, I have to have something so that when I don't have any ideas and I'm not getting anywhere I can say to myself, "At least I'm living; at least I'm doing something; I am making some contribution" — it's just psychological.

When I was at Princeton in the 1940s I could see what happened to those great minds at the Institute for Advanced Study, who had been specially selected for their tremendous brains and were now given this opportunity to sit in this lovely house by the woods there, with no classes to teach, with no obligations whatsoever. These poor bastards could now sit and think clearly all by themselves, OK? So they don't get any ideas for a while: They have every opportunity to do something, and they are not getting any ideas. I believe that in a situation like this a kind of guilt or depression worms inside of you, and you begin to worry about not getting any ideas. And nothing happens. Still no ideas come.

Nothing happens because there's not enough real activity and challenge: You're not in contact with the experimental guys. You don't have to think how to answer questions from the students. Nothing!

In any thinking process there are moments when everything is going good and you've got wonderful ideas. Teaching is an interruption, and so it's the greatest pain in the neck in the world. And then there are the longer period of time when not much is coming to you. You're not getting any ideas, and if you're doing nothing at all, it drives you nuts! You can't even say "I'm teaching my class."

If you're teaching a class, you can think about the elementary things that you know very well. These things are kind of fun and delightful. It doesn't do any harm to think them over again. Is
there a better way to present them? The elementary things are easy to think about; if you can't think of a new thought, no harm done; what you thought about it before is good enough for the class. If you do think of something new, you're rather pleased that you have a new way of looking at it.

The questions of the students are often the source of new research. They often ask profound questions that I've thought about at times and then given up on, so to speak, for a while. It wouldn't do me any harm to think about them again and see if I can go any further now. The students may not be able to see the thing I want to answer, or the subtleties I want to think about, but they remind me of a problem by asking questions in the neighbourhood of that problem. It's not so easy to remind yourself of these things.

So I find that teaching and the students keep life going, and I would never accept any position in which somebody has invented a happy situation for me where I don't have to teach. Never.

Research and Classroom Teaching
John Sedgwick, London Metropolitan University

I bring my research in the economics and economic history of film very much into my teaching. I do this because firstly, I think that I have something to say that is novel; secondly, film is such a peculiar type of commodity that it stimulates comparison and contrast, thirdly, because students as a ready audience help you think about the nature and presentation of your ideas; and finally, almost everybody has an affinity with films as a source of entertainment and cultural reference.

My major research publications have been in the journals of economic history (Sedgwick and Pokorny 1998, Sedgwick 2002, Sedgwick and Pokorny 2005a), cultural economics (Pokorny and Sedgwick 2001), and film studies (Sedgwick 2007). I have also written a 300 page monograph (Sedgwick, 2000), and edited a book of readings (Sedgwick and Pokorny 2005b). All of this work is predicated on understanding the peculiar characteristics of film as a commodity and the empirical regularities which govern the statistical distribution of revenues, costs and returns, across the 20th Century.

Perhaps the most interesting teaching project that I am involved with is a final year undergraduate class in Industrial Economics, for which, along with my colleague Dr Guglielmo Volpe, I have received two lots of mini project funding from the Economics Network. The experiment that I run is described elsewhere on the Economics Network website.

I wanted to make students aware that often general theory does not appear to explain actual experience very successfully and that by engaging them with the idiosyncratic qualities of particular industries — in this case the film industry — they were more likely to develop critical faculties. The students are given a dataset that Mike Pokorny (Westminster University) and I obtained from an industrial source and required to make sense of the data in the light of standard industrial economics (organisation) theory.

In another final year undergraduate module that I lead, the 'Economics of Film and the Arts', students are asked to test a consumer theory that I have been developing concerning the disparity that consumers commonly experience between (ex ante) expectation and (ex post) realisation and
how this might affect future decision making. This is a case in which my students help me to think through my research design, while they are encouraged to be creative as well as critical.

Finally, I have developed a MA International Business Research Methods module in which students are required to write a research paper on whether the Hofstede Index of Cultural Distance provides a good explanation for the demand for Hollywood movies across international markets — data for which students obtain from datasets held by the trade journals Variety and Screen International. Here students are responsible for their own research design. However, what they find is that demand preferences differ dramatically between cultures. In testing Hofstede's Index, students help me understand the success of Hollywood better, while they enjoy learning about the significance of cultural differences in shaping demand.

References:


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