

The Economic Way of Thinking: Fostering Detectives for a Complex World

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How do institutions shape human cooperation and conflict? How can bottom-up social movements challenge entrenched power? These questions, central to my research in political economy and institutional analysis, explore the intricate dance between rules, incentives, development, and social change. This case requires deep engagement with cutting-edge causal inference techniques and theory if we are to deduce why Estonia is free and prosperous while Chad is corrupt and poor. Inspired by scholars like Daron Acemoglu, Elinor Ostrom, Douglass North, and F.A. Hayek, and deeply informed by my training at George Mason University – renowned for its focus on experimental economics, public choice, law and economics, Smithian political economy, and the Austrian tradition – my work examines how individual action, filtered through institutional frameworks, generates diverse societal outcomes. My teaching philosophy flows directly from this research orientation: I aim to cultivate versatile ‘economic detectives’, who approach economic problems with intellectual humility, curiosity, and an eagerness to discover facts. My goal is to equip students not merely with theoretical models but with the critical lens and analytical toolkit needed to investigate complex systems, uncover hidden mechanisms of causation, trace unintended consequences, and devise innovative approaches to real-world puzzles.

Echoing Hayek, I view learning as a dynamic process of knowledge discovery and the distribution of economic ideas. Economics provides a robust framework for sleuthing this process. My role as an educator is to make this framework accessible and relevant, fostering genuine analytical skills rather than rote memorization. Research and teaching are symbiotic endeavors in my practice. The classroom becomes a laboratory for exploring mysteries encountered in research, refining ideas through discussion, and engaging students in the ongoing intellectual conversation. For instance, findings from my research comparing the long-term institutional impacts of violent and nonviolent revolutions (Ammons, 2024, *World Development Perspectives*) directly inform case study analyses in my International Economic Policy course (ECON 385). Students use these research frameworks to dissect historical events, debating why different forms of regime change yielded divergent outcomes in property rights or economic freedom. This allows them to grasp firsthand the real-world consequences of institutional design.

To bring economic principles to life and hone students’ detective skills, I use a student-centered pedagogy that blends rigorous content with interactive methods. Foundational knowledge is established through lectures, but learning is deepened through active engagement. Trade simulations, inspired by Nobel laureate Vernon Smith, allow students to act as investigators, discovering principles like comparative advantage and wealth creation through direct interaction, often leading to ‘aha’ moments that lectures alone cannot replicate. Case studies drawn from history and current events serve as complex ‘scenes’ demanding investigation into the interplay of choices and rules. A cornerstone of my approach is regular reflective writing – weekly essays where students apply course concepts to analyze policies or events, effectively ‘filing reports’ on their analytical findings. Crucially, I employ a teach-to-mastery approach for these assignments. This involves providing detailed, targeted feedback and allowing students opportunities to revise their work. The focus is on achieving proficiency in applying core analytical tools; initial drafts might offer surface-level analysis, but revised essays consistently demonstrate a deeper capacity to identify assumptions, trace unintended consequences, and engage with institutional nuances – key skills for any economic detective. Student evaluations consistently highlight the effectiveness of this iterative feedback process in fostering their analytical development.

Creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment is paramount. My teaching philosophy strikes a balance between the enduring wisdom in foundational economic texts, particularly those of classical thinkers like Adam Smith, and the need to employ innovative methods to explore contemporary research questions whose answers are often unpredictable. This approach, valuing both established principles and emergent phenomena, fosters a dynamic classroom where economics is presented as a living field engaged in ongoing debate, not a static set of doctrines. This dynamism naturally encourages diverse perspectives, which I actively cultivate to enrich our collective understanding. My commitment to inclusivity is reflected in student evaluations that consistently exceed departmental and university averages for encouraging diverse viewpoints. Beyond formal methods, I ensure accessibility through scheduled appointments and virtual meetings, striving for a welcoming atmosphere that balances intellectual rigor with kindness and engagement, as noted by students.

My capacity to foster such an environment is significantly shaped by ten years of designing and running academic programs for the Institute for Humane Studies. This role provided extensive hands-on experience in developing curricula for diverse audiences, facilitating rigorous discussions on complex topics among students and faculty with varied viewpoints, and mentoring emerging scholars. These experiences directly inform how I structure interactive course elements, manage classroom debates to ensure broad participation, and build a supportive intellectual community conducive to critical inquiry. I actively seek opportunities to mentor students and involve them in the research process, further developing their 'detective' skills. For example, I recently partnered with two Wabash College students, guiding them through the research process and co-authoring work, which helped advance their understanding and practical application of economic analysis. This included data generation, analysis, and writing results for a paper exploring blockchain research in top economics journals. Additionally, I connected these students to the paper's co-author, Eric Alston, at an academic conference where the students presented their research. Leveraging my academic network to enhance my teaching broadens students' understanding of the profession's norms and exposes them to brilliant minds beyond our discipline and institution.

Ultimately, my teaching strives to equip students with the economic way of thinking – a versatile lens for analyzing, questioning, and contributing to the understanding and improvement of the world. By integrating rigorous analysis, methodological pluralism, real-world application, interactive engagement, and continuous feedback within an inclusive and dynamic environment, I aim to inspire the next generation of economic detectives, ready to tackle the complex challenges and opportunities of our time by understanding the spontaneous orders that emerge from human action and interaction.