

Mike Pottenger

Mike Pottenger started tutoring in 2002 teaching Introductory Econometrics and has tutored every semester since, including most summer semesters. In that time, he has tutored in introductory, intermediate and third-year Macroeconomics, introductory and intermediate Microeconomics, undergraduate and postgraduate Quantitative Methods, International Finance, Derivative Securities, Modern Japanese History and Pacific War History. The style of his teaching in these classes ranged from problem-based learning utilising mathematics and software packages, to problem-based learning focusing on conceptual analysis and group-work, to much broader, free-form discursive classes.

Personally, depending on the style of learning, the challenges and techniques of teaching can be quite different. Students in quantitative classes tend to be interested in receiving definitive answers that can be demonstrated and proven, classes based on conceptual analysis are often interested in discussion and debate as well as learning particular models, while those subjects that focus intensively on discursive analysis tend to be specifically interested in broader and more substantive debate and learning the mechanics of argument.

Despite these differences, students in any kind of subject appreciate more than anything else an enthusiastic, open and honest approach that illustrates the key concepts and their place in the relevant field. This often means describing the core ideas with as little jargon as possible, and highlighting the limitations and weaknesses of the theories or techniques that are being taught, rather than slavishly drilling students about the details.

I still prepare for my classes in the same way I prepared for my very first tutorial. I make sure I have reviewed the material in detail and know my way around the topic. As those of you who have studied before will know, students always feel more comfortable and confident with a tutor who knows their stuff and doesn't have to refer to notes throughout the tutorial to review solutions, answer questions and discuss concepts.

I've found that it's often useful to prepare different styles of responses for different scenarios, depending on the reaction and participation of the students in the class. Sometimes students are ready to do most of the thinking and talking for you, and in other situations they need more coaxing.

When I started tutoring I expected that in every class there'd be a mix of students who were hard-working, and some who were uninterested. Strangely though, I found I sometimes have one class of students that are all eager and dedicated, and another full of students who are less enthusiastic. This was quite a shock the first time it happened to me – it meant that I couldn't simply have one spiel to use in each class, but had to tailor my style to each class.

Cracking a quiet and uninterested class early is crucial to prevent those students from deciding that being silent and introverted is the norm – a particular risk for first-year classes where the students are often nervous and unsure about how tutorials work. Carefully planning some follow-up questions to ask that can help push students in the

right direction (without just giving them the answers and turning the tute into a mini-lecture) is well worth doing, even though it can be quite challenging at first.

Tutoring requires you to be enthusiastic, as well as honest and clear in your style. Your enthusiasm will help to keep students engaged with the material. Honesty reassures the students that they can trust you to give them the right information. If you don't have it on hand you can simply tell them, and get the information to them as soon as possible – nothing is more discouraging and confusing for a student than a tutor who tries to fudge their way through a question they're unsure about.

In terms of being clear, if you set out the ground rules for a how a tutorial will operate from day one, students will be in no doubt about what is or is not going to happen in the class. And if you clearly explain how and why you're addressing the tutorial problems in the way you do, it'll help the students understand your own approach. They'll know where you're going and why, and will feel more comfortable asking additional questions (or even asking you to try explaining it in a different way).