

Teaching Statement

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For as long as I remember, I have wanted to teach, to be a teacher. I grew up in China, and this sentiment is there quite common among young people. It becomes less common as people age, but my feelings about this did not change. When I was in high school, I sought out opportunities to tutor students in classes below me. I enjoyed this immensely, even giving up much of the little free time I had to work through problems in mathematics and physics with younger students. My energy for teaching only increased, and I pursued additional opportunities during my undergraduate studies in Shanghai. One of these was particularly impactful: I gave up three weeks of my summer break so that I could teach English to disadvantaged students in Henan province, China. This was a formative experience upon which I often reflect, and it continues to shape how I understand teaching even today. I have used these concepts both when teaching undergraduate classes as well as graduate classes (including core Microeconomic Theory, for which I was the TA). My teaching philosophy can be captured by the following.

Knowing my audience. From my experience in Henan, it became clear that my teaching is more effective when it is tailored according to needs, expectations and backgrounds of the students. I applied this to my undergraduate managerial economics class at George Mason University, by focusing more on intuition and application of theory rather than mathematical derivations. One student in that class commented, “I really enjoyed the models and practical applications of econ concepts.” When teaching PhD micro, however, I shifted to more extensive coverage of the mathematics, while continuing to provide strong economic intuitions.

Establishing mutual respect. This was particularly emphasized in my Henan experience, when I was working with a disadvantaged population who I had not previously met. I found two strategies particularly effective in creating an environment of mutual respect. One was to show the students respect. I found this unconditional display of confidence in them was reflected in their confidence and respect of me. Second, I found expectations to be very important. I found it was crucial to set guidelines, and to provide positive reinforcement when they behave according to expectations. I take both of these lessons into my teaching today, and have applied them successfully at George Mason. For example, on the first day of my managerial economics class, I told my students what to expect from me: I post lecture slides immediately following each class, I reply to emails promptly and return exams in a timely manner. I also provide written guidelines about group projects at the beginning of the term, and I respect them as adults. At the same time, I also specified what I expect from them: work hard as a learner and a team player, and respect their colleagues in class and in group assignments. In the teaching evaluations, students strongly agreed that the instructor showed respect for the students (my score 4.91/5.00; department average 4.74/5.00), that the course grading policy was clearer than the department average (my score 4.55/5.00; department average 4.50/5.00) and that their assignments and exams were returned in a reasonable amount of time (my score 4.82/5.00; department average 4.60/5.00).

Communicating in an efficient and supportive way. Another lesson my experiences have taught me is that different people are better learning in different ways. Some are better at reading, some prefer visualizations and some learn best from examples. For this reason, I ensure that I include all of these when I bring a new concept to the class. For instance, when I

introduced Hotelling's law in my managerial economics class, I started from an example of how two beer vendors locate themselves on a beach. I also drew a line representing the beach, putting each of the two vendors on the line and visually detailing their location strategies. Finally, I used the model to explain actual businesses examples (e.g., filling station locations or airline departure schedules). Moreover, despite these best efforts in my experience there are often some students who need further explanations. To improve understanding, I encourage students to communicate with me before, during and after class. Indeed, for the behavioral economics class where I was the teaching assistant for two consecutive years, I sat down with each group of students, addressed any confusion they might have, and provided feedback and suggestions for their on-going group projects. This is also an area, it turns out, where there is important crossover between my research and teaching: in experiments, it is crucial to be certain that the participants understand the instructions clearly.

Engaging my students in hands-on learning by classroom experiments. Nobel Laureate Vernon Smith continually emphasizes that economics concepts are better learned when experienced, and only then can they be easily applied. In my research experiments, I always walk my participants through a few practice rounds to improve their understanding of the environment. The same can be realized using classroom experiments, no matter whether it is about markets with a large number of players or interpersonal interactions within a small group. In my managerial economics class, my students played a few versions of a car bargaining game between buyer and seller, through which they experienced how fall-back options and the relative impatience of bargainers can impact allocations. In my behavioral economics class, I guided students through a double auction market experiment where they found prices to quickly and accurately converge to the competitive equilibrium value. I have found that the process of experiencing the market helps to substantially improve students' understanding of the economic theory that underlies the market outcomes.

Cultivating undergraduate research. In my experience, lectures alone are not enough to generate top learning outcomes. I emphasize the importance of students to create knowledge themselves, not only by involving them in class discussions but also adopting more challenging assignments such as case studies, group projects and referee reports. In my managerial economics class, students completed a group project where they designed a solution to a business problem. In my behavioral economics class, students were asked to complete a group project where they apply organizational behavior concepts to contemporary issues facing non-profit organizations. To many of the students this was new and they felt lost. To give students confidence in this task I provided them with detailed written instructions, offered any help they needed all the way along, and gave them concrete suggestions for improvement as the project neared its end. I believe that for undergraduate research there are no right or wrong ideas, but there is definitely a right approach. It is interesting that the same is true of my experimental economics research.

An old proverb states, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." I have found that when I teach well I am able to convey not only knowledge, but also ways of thinking and acting. As a teacher, I always strive towards this goal, and always look towards helping each of my students achieve her scholarly ambitions. Perhaps one of my students is like I was at that age, and perhaps they too will one day become a teacher.