

Teaching Statement - Teaching Philosophy

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Genuine passion Having grown up in rural China, I now find myself in the United States completing my Ph.D. in economics. I can hardly express my gratitude to those mentors who lifted me up and made it possible for me to be where I am today. Beyond helping me to develop my knowledge and abilities, they inspired me to pursue my intellectual endeavors. I have a deep personal regard for the transformative power of inspiring teachers, and this admiration fuels my own desire to pursue teaching as a career.

Interest in students as individuals My passion for teaching naturally leads to my interest in getting to know my students as individuals. One routine I have in my classes is asking my students to write a brief autobiography, framed in ways that are relevant to the course content, as the first homework assignment. From this brief paper, I learn valuable information about students' backgrounds, attitudes, and instructional needs early on in the semester. Throughout the semester, I set up individual meetings with my students to discuss their goals and progress. I also always arrive early to class so that I can chat with the students and get to know them personally. These efforts also help my students to quickly recognize my genuine concern about them, and they feel comfortable approaching me and seeking my help.

Challenging but fair classes Although I strive to create an approachable image of myself as a teacher, I do make sure that my classes are always fair but challenging. In my experience, students learn best when expectations are high but they are also being set up for success. Therefore, as the instructor for introductory macroeconomics, I carefully designed the evaluation and support systems to make sure the students know that their efforts are expected and will be properly rewarded. In addition, I ensured that the class is well organized and that all related material and information are readily available to everyone. In particular, I provided class notes and make them available online. Lastly, I paid special attention to preview and review materials, which I linked together so that students can learn the material with maximum efficiency. For example, I always sent out an outline before each class and followed up with a class summary afterward. I believe it is crucial to guide students in their efforts by pointing out how individual components fit into the overall picture and by helping them to make connections between different concepts.

Fun and individualized learning processes A challenging class should still be fun, and organized materials for a class can be tailored to students' needs. I strongly believe that a lively and individualized learning experience is the key to engaging students.

To make learning fun, I always try to connect the course material to real world examples. Students have more interest in learning when they can relate concepts to concrete examples. One of the most effective ways to make the connection is through discussing current events. For example, when teaching introductory macroeconomics, I always incorporate newspaper or journal articles that are relevant to the material. Students enjoy expressing their thoughts on current issues and at the same time develop critical thinking skills. Depending on the unique features of each class, I add different fun elements. For example, when teaching game theory, I design games for students to play in class. Students like to compete with each other and win prizes, but they also need to seriously engage in strategic thinking if they want to win the game. This fact helps them appreciate the essence of game theory.

A lively learning experience can only be achieved when the classroom environment is inclusive so that all students feel comfortable to contribute to class discussion. Students sometimes prefer not to

speak up in class because they feel different from their classmates, or be worried about confirming negative stereotypes with their academic performance. Therefore, I often relate my personal experiences to create a comfortable rapport with the class. For example, to encourage students to speak up in class, I often tell them my own story of how I would ask questions in class when I first came to the States. At that time my English was so broken that the first answer I would always get from the professor was: “Excuse me, but could you repeat your question?” Even though I was very embarrassed I kept rephrasing my question until my professor finally understood what I was asking. I knew that it was 10 times better to clear up confusions in class rather than go home and be frustrated over the assignment. As time went by, not only did I manage to clear up my confusion with increasing ease, I noticed that my English was improving. More importantly, my classmates sensed that I was easygoing, and I started to make friends. When I tell stories like this, my students realize that I really encourage them to express themselves in class. Active participation from different students create a lively classroom environment and everyone benefits from the diverse perspectives.

Teaching has to be individualized since even students in the same class tend to have different goals and expectations. For example, in advanced undergraduate classes, there are always gifted, self-motivated students who want to learn beyond the required material for the class. For those students, I inquire what their particular interests are and frequently post additional readings that follow those interests; I also encourage them to come to my office hours for further discussion. Several of my former students have told me that they were so inspired by the class that they are now pursuing their interests further in graduate school. For the students who may lack the confidence or motivation of these high achievers, I work hard to provide extra support by supplementing the notes with cookbook procedures for solving important problems, illustrated with examples. I also use office hours to offer extra, slower paced lectures to all students who need additional help. Lastly, as part of my commitment to student-centered learning, I pay special attention to identify and help at-risk students. I often reach out to my students when I noticed differences in their reactions during lecture, or changes in their attendance or effort on assignments.

He who teaches, learns “He who teaches, learns” is an old Chinese saying I learned when I was a student. I never really understood it until I became a teacher myself. I have learned so much from teaching, not only about the material I teach, but also about the importance of mentoring .

Teaching is the best way to deepen one’s own understanding of a subject. This is particularly true of introductory courses, where an instructor must explain the most fundamental aspects of and reasons for the field of study. I am continually surprised at how my students, through their unexpected questions and different perspectives, inspire me to keep questioning my assumptions and developing my own understanding of the concepts I teach. Ideas that have arisen from some of these classroom exchanges have motivated parts of my research.

My skills as an instructor are constantly evolving with the help of my students. I regularly survey my students about the way a class is designed, touching on issues such as pace, difficulty level, materials to cover, and ways of interpretation. With these feedbacks, I often learn how to best accommodate students’ diverse learning styles.

My students have also taught me how important it is to be a good mentor. Many of my former students have stayed in touch with me, whether to ask for recommendations, to update me on their progress, or simply to “check in” with me. Seeing them thrive in their own academic or non-academic careers is one of the greatest rewards I have experienced in my teaching career.

Teaching Experience and Interests

This is a list of courses that I have taught:

- Introductory Microeconomics
- Introductory Macroeconomics (as an instructor)
- Game Theory (advanced undergraduate level)
- Macroeconomic Theory (Ph.D. level)

These are the courses that I am comfortable teaching:

- Macroeconomics at all levels (one of my major research fields)
- International finance at all levels (one of my major research fields)
- International trade at undergraduate levels (I have completed field courses)
- Microeconomics at undergraduate levels (I have completed field courses)
- Empirical finance at undergraduate levels (I have taken field courses)

I am also interested in teaching specific courses that fit my research background, such as the Chinese economy and computational economics. You can find my students' evaluations of my teaching, along with additional information, at my teaching website: <http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/fudongzhang/teaching/>. Please feel free to contact me for any additional information.