Teaching Statement - Teaching Philosophy

Fudong Zhang

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 indebtedness to those mentors who lifted me up and made it possible for me to be where I am today. Beyond helping me to develop knowledge and abilities, they inspired my lifelong intellectual pursuits. 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 knowing my students as individuals. My interest in them is the first thing I want my students to recognize. To this end, I pay attention to details about them, correctly pronouncing their names, remembering the small mistakes in their homework, and arriving early to class so that I can chat with them and get to know them personally. I also routinely set up individual meetings with my students to discuss their goals and progress.

Moreover, I often relate my personal experiences to create a comfortable rapport with each 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 am genuinely interested in them and want them to 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. I therefore carefully design the evaluation and support systems to make sure that their efforts are properly rewarded, and I clearly communicate to them what the standards are and what tools are available to help them succeed.

In particular, on the very first day of class I provide my students with a detailed evaluation structure that I will use throughout the semester. I make it clear what the standards are and what kind of support will be available. In addition, I ensure that the class is well organized and that all related materials and information are readily available to everyone. In particular, I provide class notes and make them available online. Lastly, I pay special attention to preview and review materials, which I link together so that students can learn the material with maximum efficiency. For example, I always send out an outline before each class and follow up with a class summary afterward. I believe it is crucial to guide students in their efforts by pointing out how individual assignments 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 students’ daily lives. Students have more interest in learning when they can link concepts to their own individual experiences. 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 by thinking outside the classroom. Depending on the unique features of each class, I add different fun elements. For example, when teaching game theory, I carefully 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.

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 learn 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 same star quality, confidence, or motivation as 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.

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 can adjust my classes to best meet the needs of certain group of students.

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 and become successful colleagues – no longer “my students” – 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 a sole 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 taken field courses)
- Microeconomics at undergraduate levels (I have taken 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 Chinese economics and computational economics. You can find my students’ evaluations of my teaching, along with some other relevant information, at my teaching website. Please also feel free to contact me for any additional information.