Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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During the past 5 years at Brandeis International Business School, I’ve gained extensive experience in teaching undergraduate, master and PhD students of various class sizes ranging from 5 students per course to more than 90 students per course. In the latest three classes that I have taught, I got 4.09/5.00 (with a department average of 3.95), 4.21/5.00 (with a department average of 4.11), and 4.47/5.00 (with a department average of 4.11) in the course evaluation, respectively. Several students say that I am “one of the best teachers” they have ever met. My teaching area is mainly statistics, econometrics, empirical finance and development economics. However, I am willing to broaden my teaching field and take diversified responsibilities along my career path in the future.

In my understanding, the goal of teaching is to extract the key knowledge from a relatively thick book, to convey it precisely to students and to inspire their further interests in the subject. I hope that by the time students leave my class they have really understand relevant materials and are able to apply them flexibly in their future study and career. I also hope that the students feel the whole learning process is enjoyable.

Based on these goals and according to my teaching experience, I have gained some understanding about how to become an effective and successful instructor. In this statement, I will present my thoughts in the following four aspects: clear presentation, relevant application, organized course structure, and positive attitude ---- or in short CROP.

1. Clear Presentation

I think the basic requirement for an instructor is to convey information logically and accurately to the class, and to let the students leave the classroom with a clear understanding of the knowledge rather than confusion.

At the beginning of each class, I outline the main topics I plan to cover on that day and list them along the left-top of the white board. This helps students to have a broad picture in their mind throughout the class. I always control the speed of speaking, and slow down when talking about important materials. Finally, repeating important concepts whenever there is a chance proves to be an effective way to help students memorize them. Actually, when I link the materials taught in the later stage of a course with some emphasized issues taught earlier in the semester, students always have both a deeper impression and a clearer understanding of these emphases.

I always find graphical explanation a useful approach to illustrate abstract concepts or theories intuitively and impressively, especially to the undergraduates. For example, in my econometrics class, students tend to be confused by the complicated words “homoskedasticity” and “heteroskedasticity” at the first sight, but after showing them the graph of different distributions of dependent variable along the regression line, most students are able to give me a clear explanation of these two concepts in the quiz; and in my statistics
class, I draw a set of bell curves to illustrate the more and more concentrated distributions of sample average when the sample size gets large, which enables my students to get the underlying idea of “converging in probability” and Law of Large Number.

2. Relevant Application

Teaching undergraduate students is different from teaching PhD students. I have given review sessions for PhD level econometrics class. Those students are more enthusiastic about learning new materials and more willing to understand complicated theories, so leading the discussion is more important than stimulating interest. In contrast, I feel it very important to keep the students interested in the course contents in the undergraduate classes. To cultivate students’ interest, I encourage them to discuss the intuitive justification of a theory or a method and their possible applications in different fields. The discussions can be either with me or with their peers and either in or out of the classroom; and I have been amazed by the innovative and diverse uses of course materials my students come up with.

For instance, after learning the probit and logit model in econometrics class, one of my students wanted to conduct a research on what factors influence the possibility that people correctly understand the information one wants to convey via their Facebook profile picture. When he talked with me about his idea, I was so happy for his willingness to combine his econometrics knowledge with another topic that he was interested in and encouraged him to continue that project. During my office hours, we made lots of discussions about the choice of data, the proper model to use, the implementation of the econometrics technique, etc. By the end of the semester, he submitted this research as a term project in his class of Social Relations in Cyberspace, which finally became his senior thesis and was published in Brandeis Economics and Finance Review. Throughout my teaching experience, I have encouraged and helped the students to apply what they learned in my class to other relevant fields. I am always proud of their creative thoughts and really happy for the students’ interests in these topics.

3. Organized Course Structure

To help the students study efficiently, I feel it critical to have a clear organization of course materials, to let students know the organizational features of the course before it starts and to keep consistent with the organization designed at the beginning. Lectures, homework and exams are three complementary components of my course, and each has its unique features corresponding to its goals.

Compared to the problem sets, my lectures are relatively straightforward and illustrative, I hope to give students the main idea of the big picture in class, and ask them in the homework to apply abstract concepts to real-world situations and to dig into the details that are not expanded in class. In both of my statistics and econometrics classes, the exams are easier than the homework and are usually based on some actual empirical studies. In these exams, students are asked to summarize the main results taught in class, to interpret them critically and to utilize them appropriately in the context of a real-world problem. In addition, I sometimes assign open-ended projects or give extra-credit problems, so that students with extra energy and interests can further benefit from these exercises.
In the first class, I often hand out copies of “tips for study” which illustrate these above mentioned features. By doing so, I hope the students can have an impression of my style of teaching and gain the most payoffs by appropriately allocating their time and energy to various course materials in their future study.

However, being consistent does not exclude flexibility. When I become more familiar with students’ background with the course moving forward, I will try to select some examples that may better match their interests. For example, when teaching econometrics, if I know that most of students in my class are economic major and are simultaneously taking other economics class, I will try to give them more examples about the application of econometrics to topics in those relevant fields in economics. On the other hand, if many students are from mathematics department or have mathematics minor, I will pay more attention to the intuition behind the technical proof of the econometric theories, so that they can get deeper understanding of the economic story behind the mathematical derivations that they are good at.

4. Positive Attitude

As an instructor, my aim is to make every course an enjoyable experience both for the students and for myself, not by choosing easier topics to teach but by keeping a positive attitude and by passing this attitude on to students. No matter how large the class size is, I manage to remember each student’s name as soon as possible so that the communication between the class and me will be smoother. It is always challenging to keep students engaged and learning effectively in class, especially for some classes taught in the evening and for some students in summer class who have their own daily work. In practice, I find that it is quite helpful to encourage students to raise their doubts and comments during the lecture. Sometimes when students ask a relevant question, I will repeat or rephrase the question so that everyone in the class understands what is asked. In many cases, this will stimulate a discussion among students, and they are always excited to be able to find the answer by themselves in the end.

After the class, I try my best to give students in-time feedback on their questions and requests, and regular office hour proves to be an efficient way for students to discuss their doubts during study. Instead of step-by-step instruction, I tend to give them hints and encourage them to figure out the correct answer by themselves. It is always my great happiness to see students leave my office with satisfaction and more confidence about the course materials.

These four CROP points are what I have developed in the past three years of teaching, which not only have given me enjoyment but also have made my class an effective learning environment for the students. As an instructor, I not only tried to share what I know with my students, but also have been learning a lot from them. Through the eyes of my students, I often find new angles to look at economic concepts. Discussion with the students always inspires my thoughts about my own academic research. Having enjoyed working as an instructor, I know that I have a lot more to learn to continue improving. I look forward to pursuing this career in your institution.