

Teaching Statement

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1 Introduction

“As you’ll recall from intermediate micro...” There is no good ending to this phrase. Yet it is a refrain I’ve heard repeated countless times throughout my graduate career, deployed when the speaker intends to absolve oneself of explaining a fundamental—usually hard—economic concept. One would be hard-pressed to identify *any* useful skill not conferred by this magical course.

I did not take intermediate micro. Or any other non-introductory undergraduate economics class. I was a communications major.

Hence I’ve spent many a moment in panicked confusion trying to haphazardly recover the essential truths I was assumed to have long ago internalized. An MPA in Economics at Princeton helped flatten the learning curve. Mostly it drove home the lesson that one with doctoral ambitions in economics should not spend a decade not practicing college-level math.

At Rutgers, my first-year grad courses frequently felt like Venice without a map: a new adventure around every corner, but usually without context or direction. With hours of practice—reading and re-reading chapters of undergrad and grad textbooks—I eventually found my footing. In the later years of the program, I’ve flourished. But the experience of ignorance remains visceral, fresh in my mind.

It’s hard to pinpoint the moment things starting clicking, but a crucial one was my first experience teaching undergrad econometrics in 2017. It was, coincidentally, also the first time I *took* undergrad econometrics. The experience was transformative. I always expected I would like teaching (as I enjoy public speaking), but I did not appreciate how much I myself would learn from having to explain difficult things to others. Ideas that I had struggled for years with suddenly made sense. It was deeply gratifying to watch my students learn and grow—and to learn and grow alongside them.

As I prepare for the job market, I’ve come to appreciate what was once my biggest

stumbling block is now one of my greatest advantages: knowing all too well what it feels like not to know, I have an empathetic sense of how to explain economic theory, methods, and applications to the uninitiated. It is this perspective that pervades my teaching philosophy and goals. I suppose you could say I learned it from intermediate micro.

2 Teaching Philosophy

My approach to teaching proceeds from three assumptions: (1) learning is fun, (2) anyone can learn, and (3) often it's hard. The precise realization of each of these assumptions varies across students; my approach strives to ensure all have their best chances to make progress and enjoy it.

I find it helpful to think about my teaching strategy in terms of its two key components: style and substance. Style is the how; substance is the what.

My teaching style begins with preparation. My foremost responsibility to my students is to be prepared. For me, preparation mostly entails writing detailed notes. These slides are the core of my lectures. Not only do they serve as a helpful reference for my students, but they also force me to engage with the material I'm about to present in a disciplined and thoughtful manner, anticipating questions and points of confusion.

In other words, I endeavor to give my lectures a hard effort. Part of teaching is leading by example: I expect the same of my students. Indeed, I explicitly incorporate effort into my grading criteria, and place a higher weight on it than most. Economics is challenging. I do not expect students to be always, or even mostly, correct, but I do demand that they try. Students who work hard will succeed in my classes. This dissuades cheating and shirking. It also inculcates attitudes and habits essential for success in the workplace.

Inspiring effort is related to the third pillar of my teaching style: incentives. Even with the best of intentions, summoning the energy and desire to work hard is not easy. Part of my job is motivation. Frequent problem sets, several larger projects, and tri-semester exams require students to consistently hone their skills. My assignments and exams are designed to be thoughtful, practical, and amusing, with questions that prioritize conceptual understanding and build generalizable skills. Their volume ensures few lapses in intellectual fitness and delivers fair sample sizes for assigning course grades.

Students care about grades. But an even better way for me to inspire their work ethic is to teach with passion. Excitement is contagious. If I demonstrate that I care deeply about the material, they will be more engaged as well. Teaching is like coaching in this way: to get your charges to perform at their best, they need to be excited, encouraged, and eager. I convey passion with my attitude, my tone, and my willingness to go the extra mile when students request it.

Related to passion are two other elements of my classroom demeanor: being accessible and

having fun. Rather than be intimidating, condescending, or aloof, I strive to be inclusive, empathetic, and approachable. Not long ago, I was in their shoes, and I want them to appreciate that. It is a classroom version of the golden rule: teach others as you would like to be taught. My other emphasis is having fun. When possible, I try to be funny and entertaining, keeping the mood light especially when the material is dry or stress is high. Expending the mental energy necessary for academic success is easier when you enjoy the process.

Where style meets substance is understanding: the “how” of “what” I teach is linked by the “why.” If I do my job well, my students will discern, not memorize; my goal is comprehension, not regurgitation. I want them to come away with ideas rather than answers. This is easier said than done.

I seek to inculcate this understanding the same way I approach my own study: by being logical, comprehensive, and thorough. I order topics to create a natural flow, each lesson building on the previous, easing the difficulty level with a sensible progression. I emphasize context so that students appreciate where new ideas fit with what they know and what’s to come. I highlight both derivation and application to exploit the clarifying focus that origin and purpose impart. Organization breeds coherence; elaboration cultivates comprehension.

But the most compelling teaching is more journalism than it is encyclopedia. I structure each lesson to lead with big ideas, prioritizing intuition and concepts. I delve into details—definitions, methods, and proofs—only after the stage is set, courting complexity because I want students to come away not with a random collection of facts and formulas, but with an integrated and internally consistent system of knowledge.

I intersperse these intellectual heavy lifts with plenty of examples, illustrations that make concepts concrete and demonstrate practical relevance. As an empiricist myself, I emphasize applications not only to invigorate theory, but as important ends in themselves: specific instances of abstract methods that themselves hold general insights about human behavior.

But I also know that engaging lectures can only go so far. Mastering unfamiliar, complicated ideas takes practice. Learning is a multifaceted, iterative process. My talks are just one step of a recursive cycle that includes textbook readings, detailed notes, regular problem sets, occasional projects, and several exams. There is a mix of active and passive, listening and questioning, confusion and lucidity. Each phase reinforces, and is reinforced by, the others; skills accumulate through diverse repetition. There is no substitute for practice. My job is to structure this practice so that it stimulates rather than bores.

Diverse learning diets also maximize the chances that students with heterogeneous learning preferences and study habits have their tastes sated. But because not every idiosyncrasy can be anticipated, I take care that courses remain adaptive to students, allowing ample time for questions, review, feedback, and office hours.

3 Teaching Experience

I have twice taught undergraduate econometrics. Both were summer courses at Rutgers. Passing this course is required of majors; due to the mathematical maturity it demands, it is widely regarded as among the most foreboding. Students tend to approach it with a mixture of fear and apathy. I've set out to prove their assumptions are misplaced.

Each iteration of the course has followed the philosophy described in Section 2; indeed, these teaching experiences have helped shape my pedagogical approach. Summer courses are extra challenging given the urgency of compressed time constraints. This enforces discipline. For me, it places an even greater premium on organization and focus, demanding I be sharper and more concise. For my students, it means fewer breaks—less recovery between intense bouts—and so I must work correspondingly harder to keep them interested and motivated.

As the course evaluations I've included below demonstrate, I've been successful. Students have enjoyed my classes. They've also learned. I've not yet had to fail a student; many have flourished.

In addition, I've served as teaching assistant for four years across a diverse spectrum of courses, ranging from economic history (far from my specialty) to applied micro (definitely my specialty). These courses have helped me appreciate what students prosper and where they struggle.

4 Teaching Outlook

My preference is to teach econometrics or microeconomics, as these fields relate most closely to my own training and research. For undergraduates, I am comfortable teaching both introductory or advanced subjects in small or large settings. At the graduate level, I am best-suited for applied micro courses, including econometrics, labor, and public economics, as well as more subject-specific seminars on education, health, welfare, or other aspects of social policy.

My teaching ambitions are partly selfish: I want to teach what I want to learn. I've found that my fitness as a researcher depends on constant practice, and the best incentive for me to keep in shape is to have to explain challenging ideas and concepts to others. Teaching is also a great excuse to get up-to-date on the literature and encounter new ideas and techniques.

Core and introductory courses are appealing because they develop fundamental skills in holistic fashions. Strong foundations are crucial to efficiently consolidating and organizing new ideas. Fundamental concepts are deceptively easy to forget; recurring refreshers are good habit. On the other hand, field and advanced courses force one to explore literatures in-depth and engage with the research frontier. Unfamiliar methods, models, and applications broaden one's skill set and catalyze new ideas.

Teaching is viscerally rewarding in a way that research is not; it's a great feeling to see new ideas click with temporarily confused students and thrilling to watch progress over the course of a semester. This instantaneous feedback motivates me to be a better economist.

I recognize that most of my students will go pro in something other than academic economics. Accordingly, I will strive to make the big takeaways from my courses as broadly relevant as possible. I want my students to be able to reason as economists, appreciate how to apply the scientific method to everyday life, and be comfortable analyzing and summarizing data. To the extent possible, I also hope to cultivate interest in social policy and government, as these are fields in need of talented, energetic new hires.

5 Course Evaluations

Figure 1: Economics 322: Econometrics, Summer 2018

10/14/2019

Student Instructional Rating Survey, Summer 2018 - Cassidy Michael - mtc161

Rutgers University Student Instructional Rating
(Online Survey - Sakai)

Cassidy Michael mtc161 Summer 2018, 01:220:322:B1 — Econometrics (index #00752) Enrollment= 24, Responses= 19 Part A: University-wide Questions:	Student Responses						Weighted Means			
	Strong Disagree 1				Strong Agree 5	No response	Section	Course	Level	Dept
1. The instructor was prepared for class and presented the material in an organized manner.	0	0	0	2	17	0	4.89	4.66	4.44	4.50
2. The instructor responded effectively to student comments and questions.	0	0	0	3	16	0	4.84	4.63	4.37	4.40
3. The instructor generated interest in the course material.	0	0	2	2	15	0	4.68	4.41	4.33	4.35
4. The instructor had a positive attitude toward assisting all students in understanding course material.	0	0	0	3	16	0	4.84	4.64	4.43	4.53
5. The instructor assigned grades fairly.	0	0	0	3	16	0	4.84	4.49	4.42	4.46
6. The instructional methods encouraged student learning.	0	0	2	3	14	0	4.63	4.32	4.16	4.20
7. I learned a great deal in this course.	0	0	1	5	13	0	4.63	4.39	4.23	4.31
8. I had a strong prior interest in the subject matter and wanted to take this course.	3	3	4	4	5	0	3.26	3.41	3.81	3.88
	Poor				Excellent					
9. I rate the teaching effectiveness of the instructor as:	0	0	0	4	15	0	4.79	4.38	4.11	4.20
10. I rate the overall quality of the course as:	0	0	2	4	13	0	4.58	4.27	4.04	4.18

Figure 1 (Cont.): Economics 322: Econometrics, Summer 2018

10/14/2019

Student Instructional Rating Survey, Summer 2018 - Cassidy Michael - mtc161

What do you like best about this course?:

"The style of teaching. I've taking this course before and with a full-time faculty professor. That professor's style and attitude was horrendous. And that made me hate this course so much. However, taking class this summer with Michael has changed my perspective of this dreadful course. His attitude as well as his understanding of student life stress made this course much more humane. His jokes and real life examples make sense in this technocratic economics course. "

"The professor was organized and relatable. He was informative without being boring. "

"I liked how he always tied in real life examples instead of just focusing on the math, which really helped us learn the concepts."

"The way material was presented. Everything we needed to know was given to us and there wasnt any filler material to take up time and that we would never use."

"Empirical projects"

"The material that I learned"

"I learned a lot of basics on how to analytically evaluate economic factors and there relationships"

"I liked learning about how to interpret different models."

"Information was easily accessible and the assignments helped better your understanding of the material well."

"How I am now able to read data properly in any data set. "

If you were teaching this course, what would you do differently?:

"Nothing. I would adopt Michael's way of teaching. "

"I would just demonstrate a few more examples on how to utilize some of the equations and problems we would come across on homework and exams."

"Nothing"

"Give more frequent tests"

"I would focus more on the students coming up with the relationships of variables in 2018 instead of focusing on studies done 30-50 years ago which have less relevance in today's world "

"I would assign more homework on myeconlab to assure students are often practicing."

"More simplified information and more in class practice examples."

"More examples, but the professor did provide a great number of examples."

In what ways, if any, has this course or the instructor encouraged your intellectual growth and progress?:

"Michael's way of teaching and getting students engaged is particularly very exciting. He pushes our minds into the dimensions of an economists. His way of explaining things by breaking them into the first principles really makes this course worthy of its weight. Econometrics is challenging and a stress booster however, professors like Michael make it seem like a child's play. "

"Yes, I gained an actual interest in econometrics and I enjoy learning about the statistical significance of experiements. I now feel equipped to tackle interesting questions. "

"He has increased my passion for data analysis and has taught me a lot more tools that I can use in the future."

"Numerous ways."

"Learned how to use STATA"

"I want to take Advanced Econometrics"

"He was very available and helpful outside of class, both in areas related to the course and also areas that related to my internship"

"As a student who is not the most comfortable with coding, I believe I grew by learning how to use STATA."

Figure 1 (Cont.): Economics 322: Econometrics, Summer 2018

10/14/2019

Student Instructional Rating Survey, Summer 2018 - Cassidy Michael - mtc161

“He takes his time to explain everything instead of throwing the material at us expecting us to learn it. He really feels for us as students learning a fairly hard subject.”

“Taught me that the textbook is super important when you actually need it, unlike many other courses.”

“This course and instructor have encouraged me to look at the material in a more positive way than I was in the beginning of the course.”

Other comments or suggestions:

“As a student and a senator on this campus, I give my highest recommendations that Mr. Michael Cassidy shall be granted the privilege of a full time professor in the Economics department here at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.”

“Professor Cassidy was very clear when presenting the topics. His homeworks and projects reinforced the information we learned in class.”

“Thank you for a great experience, this is the best course I have taken in my economics major so far.”

“None.”

“N/A”

“Knowledgable professor”

“This instructor showed a great deal of effort and was always prepared for class. He created a positive learning environment.”

“Michael Cassidy has made a class I failed miserably the first time actually make sense. The homework was fairly graded without an overwhelming number of problems- just enough to help us learn the material. He always graded fairly and answered any questions and concerns promptly. I wish he was a professor, I'd take all if his classes!!!!”

“Michael Cassidy should be a full time professor here at RU and if he is teaching intermediate macroeconomics I would register for his class in a heartbeat. My favorite professor I have had so far at Rutgers.”

Figure 2: Economics 322: Econometrics, Summer 2017

10/14/2019

Student Instructional Rating Survey, Summer 2017 - Cassidy Michael

Rutgers University Student Instructional Rating
(Online Survey - Sakai)

Cassidy Michael Summer 2017, 01:220:322:B1 — ECONOMETRICS (index #00837) Enrollment= 23, Responses= 3 Part A: University-wide Questions:	Student Responses						Weighted Means			
	Strong Disagree 1				Strong Agree 5	No response	Section	Course	Level	Dept
1. The instructor was prepared for class and presented the material in an organized manner.	0	0	0	0	3	0	5.00	4.46	4.45	4.46
2. The instructor responded effectively to student comments and questions.	0	0	0	0	3	0	5.00	4.61	4.43	4.40
3. The instructor generated interest in the course material.	0	0	0	0	3	0	5.00	4.30	4.32	4.36
4. The instructor had a positive attitude toward assisting all students in understanding course material.	0	0	0	0	3	0	5.00	4.50	4.52	4.54
5. The instructor assigned grades fairly.	0	0	0	0	3	0	5.00	4.44	4.44	4.47
6. The instructional methods encouraged student learning.	0	0	0	0	3	0	5.00	4.20	4.23	4.21
7. I learned a great deal in this course.	0	0	0	0	3	0	5.00	4.25	4.31	4.34
8. I had a strong prior interest in the subject matter and wanted to take this course.	0	0	1	0	2	0	4.33	3.75	3.88	3.82
	Poor				Excellent					
9. I rate the teaching effectiveness of the instructor as:	0	0	0	0	3	0	5.00	4.29	4.26	4.23
10. I rate the overall quality of the course as:	0	0	0	0	3	0	5.00	4.18	4.24	4.21

Figure 2 (Cont.): Economics 322: Econometrics, Summer 2017

10/14/2019

Student Instructional Rating Survey, Summer 2017 - Cassidy Michael

What do you like best about this course?:

“excellent”

“His teaching has a specific point that students can efficiently learn.”

“Very interesting tool to measure causality in a complex world, great course.”

If you were teaching this course, what would you do differently?:

“Nothing, professor is extremely intelligent and well prepared.”

In what ways, if any, has this course or the instructor encouraged your intellectual growth and progress?:

“Opening doors using statistical software and hands on handling of information and measurements was extremely interesting and useful.”

Other comments or suggestions::

“Great professor, great class”
