Teaching Philosophy Statement

One of my most enjoyable experiences in graduate school has been teaching undergraduate courses. My enthusiasm for teaching emerges from the dynamism of communication with my students and our engagements in effective and reciprocal discussions. I have taught two courses at UIUC. The first is NRES-310 Natural Resource Economics, in which juniors and seniors learn to apply economic theory in the agricultural and environmental context in order to solve resource management problems for water, land, forest, and fishery. The second is ACE-210 Environmental Economics, a freshman-level offering that introduces the economic framework for students to understand environmental problems and policy solutions. Both courses cover broad topics and are designed for students from different academic backgrounds: as such, they have been great fits for my teaching philosophy. I summarize the latter in four points: Guide, Obligate, Interact, and Care. I follow these principles to help students get motivated and gain knowledge and confidence from my class. I am proud to have been successful and to have been recognized in the prestigious UIUC “List of Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students” for both classes.

First of all, I consider that my most important role as a teacher is as a tour guide to unveil the story behind the concept, theory, and equations for my students who are new to the field. I draw from their prior knowledge and experiences to inspire their learning. For students without any economics training, intuitive explanations using their familiar stories direct their attention and motivate their critical thinking about economic principles. As a tour guide, I include examples of the environmental activist Greta Thunberg’s viewpoint about greenhouse gases to address the continuum of environmental perspective, and I discuss Nobel prize winner Elinor Ostrom’s solution for the tragedy of commons to stimulate their interest. My design of activities in class accommodates all students to participate in the game and encourage them to apply what they learn from the class to real-life situations. This past spring, for example, I used COVID-19 as a case study to understand the impact of scarcity on the price of N95 masks. I involved the class in a bidding game for N95 masks to generate demand curves, which enhanced both the class engagements and students’ understanding of economic reasoning.

Next, being responsible for my classes is vital for me. This includes not only presenting the content with clarity and accuracy but also backing up my students’ learning requests for both knowledge and skills. Knowing what the students expect out of my class helps clarify my learning and teaching goals. In our first class, I encourage students to provide a one-page self-introduction and their anticipation for class with extra credit as an incentive. With their expectation in mind, I design my classes organically with easily captured highlights with resonating takeaways with few keywords at the end. The takeaways are not at the full length of material, so that they can also be self-motivated to dig into the class content. Other than that, I encourage them to voice their concerns about concepts they do not understand. There are discussion sessions, review sessions, office hours, and one-on-one meetings I provide for communication outside of the class. Besides the class materials I provide, I introduce my students to the Excel skills needed to organize and visualize the data. The skills they obtain from
the practices and the projects equip them to handle basic data analysis. By doing so, I relate myself to my students to understand their needs and provide the resources they request.

Interactive learning is what I pursue when leading my discussion sessions. I value spontaneous comments and reasonings from students more than anything else. During class, I encourage students to collect the necessary information from the material and to practice the language of environmental economics. In a typical problem-solving session designed for in-class exercises, I usually provide hints for students to inspire their thinking about economic logic and invite them to share their answers, thoughts, and questions. I try to involve everyone in the class to work as a team and solve the problem step by step. Other examples include a student transaction blog that I have designed for a “common pool” product game. The students figure out the reasons why there is underinvestment, even without my introducing the theory of the common pool problem. Another asynchronous game of environmental externality of noise stimulates the students to participate in the trade of a robot dog to earn the market payoff. The passion that students develop to strategize the social welfare maximization is the most enjoyable part of my course, especially when I show the scoreboard of the payoff rank.

Students’ emotional health is equally important to their learning process. By keeping calm and rational, I help secure their performance. Learning new material and striving to understand can be challenging for some students. This was particularly true during the Covid shutdown with lots of pressures. Many students reached out to me and expressed their stress. In response, I specified my role in helping them get through these hard times. That includes but is not limited to more flexible office hours, timely email response, the transparent progress of credit-earning, clear time schedule, and all other details to eliminate uncertainty as much as possible. Moreover, the video recordings for my classes, the interactive whiteboard with my real-time handwritings in the zoom meetings, and even the camera turned on show my availability and support for the students as if we are face-to-face in the class. Though these “tricks” may seem relatively trivial, I believe that they helped substantially reduce any anxiety related to incomplete information. More broadly, my devotion to individual communications demonstrates my commitment to student learning and develops mentorship for my students. I am happy to be the one my students turn to when they need help.

I believe there are many more approaches or practices for effective teaching, but the essence of my teaching philosophy is to guide my students’ learning, be a responsible teacher, create interactive classrooms, and provide emotional support for my students whenever and wherever I can. As I continue teaching, I will apply my teaching strategies and philosophy to my courses and will be an advisor and a mentor to all my students.