Teaching Statement

Every time I stand in front of a group of students, I always think what a great privilege it is to be there, and I always aim to honor that privilege by making students the center of my practice. I approach teaching with the same perspective with which I approach research, and so I take an evidence-based approach to course and lesson planning. I believe in active learning, given its proven results (Freeman et al., 2014) and in my lessons I always include activities that require students’ participation and engagement. During my time as an instructor for an introductory course in environmental economics (ACE 210-Environmental Economics), with 120 students under my responsibility, I made use of a clicker device (Salemi, 2009) to create momentary breaks in the lecture to grab students’ attention, to check their comprehension on the material covered so far, and to pique their interest of the coming material by asking them for their opinion on a given subject. This was an efficient way of creating a more interactive and engaging experience for students in a big lecture class.

I think that students’ attention should be directed towards understanding and learning the material, and as such I try to remove all foreseeable obstacles that are under my control and could prevent them from doing so. Specifically, for my environmental economics class I tried to organize the lectures in a logical way, I clearly communicated the objectives of the course and of every lecture to the students, and I tried to anticipate any possible disruption and prepared for it. Students responded positively to this approach, as I received good feedback from them, with an average rate from students of 4.4 out of 5 in organization, 4.1 in clarity of objectives and 4.6 in the perceived preparedness of the instructor.

I have also had the chance to teach smaller groups. I taught introductory macroeconomics and international economics at the undergraduate level in Colombia, with groups of no more than 25 students. I was also initially a teaching assistant for the environmental economics course I later taught with full responsibility at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, leading 50-minute weekly discussion sections for groups of 20 students on average. The experience of teaching in such different settings, with students from different cultural backgrounds, has made me more flexible in my teaching practice, and more perceptive of the role of culture in the classroom. I like to foster a culture of openness, respect and dialogue within my classrooms, and I do so through the setting of expectations at the beginning of the course, and through my example as a teacher. I try to foster dialogue by asking students open-ended questions during lectures, and by directly addressing students who I had identified as being less outspoken and giving them the chance participate in class. Cultural differences also determine what different students find as relatable examples of concepts seen in class, and so I would always try to provide several examples that would address these differences.

Making the concepts seen in class seem relatable to students’ lives and to the real world is a way in which I like to encourage an appetite for learning in students. During my classes I always try to connect concepts to current evidence from research papers, and to policies that have an impact on people’s lives. For my environmental economics class, I invited fellow PhD students from the department to present their research, so that my students could see how the concepts learned in class are actually being used in applied research, and to show them what a research project in environmental
economics looks like. I received positive feedback from both students and from those who presented, and I would aim to replicate this experience in the future.

I am always striving to improve my teaching practice, by identifying blind spots through feedback from students, teaching assistants and other instructors. In the future, my goal is to work on improving my practice along several dimensions. First, I want to make my practice more accessible to students of all backgrounds, by collecting more data about my students so that I can adjust my lessons. Second, I want to focus on multimodal learning that keeps students with different learning styles more engaged. Third, I also want to explore novel ways of organizing courses in a way that allows me to leverage existing resources (such as pre-recorded lectures), so I can devote in-class time to more practical exercises that reinforce students comprehension (Caviglia-Harris, 2016). Relatedly, my experience as a teaching assistant this semester leading virtual discussion sections, has led me aware of the possibilities and limits of online instruction. Additionally, I want to help students embrace active learning, by explaining how it can be more challenging and lead them to feel they have learned less, but that it has been proven to lead to significant gains in learning (Deslauriers, McCarty, Miller, Callaghan, & Kestin, 2019).

Finally, I believe I am well positioned to teach field courses in environmental, development and health economics, as well as methods courses, in both cases at the undergraduate and graduate level. At the undergraduate level, I can also teach introductory micro and macroeconomics courses, as I have done before, and at the graduate level, I can teach methods courses. Specifically, I can teach courses at the intersection of machine learning and standard econometric techniques, to help keep students up to date with the latest research methods.

References