Teaching Statement

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I have taught a wide variety of courses in my time as a PhD student, but the goals I set for my students and the guiding principles of how I approach each class stay much the same. One of the strengths of economics is the broadly applicable technical skills students can learn along the way. While this can be difficult or intimidating for many students, the right intuition and context can make technical skills more accessible and seem like an exciting and rewarding challenge rather than a bothersome hill to climb. While technical skills like applied math or statistics are indeed useful, at times the focus in economics courses can veer to much towards mastering algebra or calculus. Technical skills do little good without the broad qualitative knowledge to contextualize a brand-new problem and choose the right tools to find a solution. While focusing more on a conceptual understanding may require more difficult teaching and assessment approaches, the payoff for students is well worth it. Finally, many of our students use these skills and economic insight to think about policy, business practices, or even personal actions. It's crucial that we train them to understand where positive descriptions of the world end and normative ethical considerations begin, and how the two are sometimes inextricably linked.

Teaching technical skills like utility maximization or statistics might seem straightforward for economists new to teaching. Do some problems on the board. How hard can that be? The truth is while it may be simple to prepare *something* for a lecture, keeping students engaged and setting them up for success is much more difficult. When solving mathematical problems in an intermediate economics course, for example, I do not simply go through the steps. Rote memorization for problems in economics is not only incredibly difficult, but it also sets students up for failure when facing a new style of problem. Instead, I stop to work through the how and why of each step. For example, I do not simply tell students to remember that utility is maximized when the marginal rate of substitution equals the price ratio. I show them how this equality can be reorganized into the often more intuitive "bang per buck" equality which equalizes the marginal utility per dollar for each good. While I have found many students prefer this interpretation, I also frequently check in with students to find what works for them. While a simple, "any questions?", followed by a few seconds of silence might seem reassuring, I make sure to give students ample time to digest and consider a response. Additionally, many students will not volunteer their confusion or have a well formulated question regardless of how long I pause for. For these students, it is important to ask probing questions and allow them to reflect and draw out where exactly the difficulty or confusion lies.

While the exact approach might look different for a different set of skills, like learning the programming language R, the motivation for that approach is much the same. Telling students to memorize functions or syntax and testing students on simple programming tasks might be straightforward, but it doesn't set students up for success. After 8 years of experience, I still frequently google new problems I encounter. In the R guidebooks I created for three different public policy courses I was sure to give students an understanding of the fundamentals that facilitate learning on their own and answering questions that will inevitably come up. Understanding the basic syntax, how to read help files, or how to make heads or tails of an error message are fundamental skills that can be difficult to gain without guidance, but so powerful once mastered. While I have not graded assessment materials in a class like this myself, my experience as a student and researcher has shown me the best way to put these skills to the test is with an independent project, be it a term paper or a short data presentation.

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Being an effective economist is not just about acquiring math and statistics skills. It requires a deep understanding of economics. I was fortunate to have been closely mentored by Professor Jim Adams on how to do this effectively. While teaching both "American Industries" and "The European Economy", students learned by reading a variety of sources such as economic journal articles, court cases, government documents, and more. While teaching technical skills often lends itself to an interactive lecture, this course style more often requires a true class discussion. Managing an active flowing discussion and ensuring all the important material is covered without devolving into a lecture requires extra care and planning, but my experience in this class has showed me it can be an incredibly effective teaching style. Students learn to actually use their knowledge to break down a complicated subject and draw out insights from the same source materials they will use in their careers. Digesting this material requires that students draw not just on the new concepts from the class they are in, but on skills they developed in the core classes as well. One difficulty with this approach is the unavoidable fact that teacher's also have a responsibility to assess student progress. While assessment is more difficult, it can be done effectively. In these courses I developed and graded free response and essay style questions. Some of these questions have clear answers tied to specific concepts, but many could be answered effectively in several ways. This tests students on their ability to communicate clearly and make an argument based on evidence. In these two classes as well as in Introductory Economics and Ethics in Economics, we also assessed students using papers. Papers are a great way to simultaneously teach and assess progress.

Finally, in all the courses I have taught, I take extra care to ensure students understand the ethical and normative implications of what they are learning. In Introductory Economics, for example, I do not avoid the difficult conversations about what exactly economic surplus is. While this plays a role in every class I have taught, it took a front seat in "Ethics in Economics". For example, we emphasized the important point that assuming people maximize utility and are "rational" just means they have consistent preferences. It doesn't necessarily mean they are selfish. Assessing students understanding of what is implied by a particular model or framework can be relatively straightforward, but this class also showed me the value in fostering and assessing student's ability to make normative arguments using short papers. A lot of policy work, for example, does fall into explicit advocacy where ethical normative arguments are a vital part of the job. While the specific position they take obviously does not play a role in their grade, articulating that position clearly without misrepresenting the evidence economics can bring to bear is a valuable skill. While I speak in more detail about how I foster an inclusive learning environment in my diversity statement, special attention to ethical issues in economics can make for a welcoming environment that shows how economics can be useful regardless of student's normative beliefs.

My hope as an instructor is to give my students a deep understanding of economics with practical skills and knowledge that will help them in whatever career they choose. While this is not always easy, I have been fortunate that the opportunities and guidance I received while teaching at the University of Michigan have set me up for success in my future career as a professor.