Teaching Statement

Laura Meinzen-Dick

One of the greatest joys I have found in teaching is holding high standards for the students, and then watching them surprise themselves with what they can achieve. I push them to transition from consumers to active participants in the knowledge creation process, a role that many never envisioned themselves in but are so proud to inhabit. I aim to create conditions in my classes for students to engage deeply with the material and develop new ways of thinking; to my mind, this is one of the most valuable skills that economics can teach. Economic modes of thinking have the power to help us understand the social world around us, the role of policy in shaping the world, and the ability to untangle cause and effect – all key for students to take into their careers and lives as citizens.

For us to collaborate in their learning in this way, I underly my high expectations with a supportive process for students to achieve, and model forgiveness when they fall short of their own standards. This involves acknowledging the difficulty of the content, and reminding students that failure is necessary for learning. I also conduct daily surveys that ask students what they have learned or enjoyed in that class, as well as what they are confused about or what questions they have. These serve several purposes: first, they encourage reflection on the content covered that day, and encourage meta-learning. Second, they create space to express struggles in a low-stakes manner, so that I can address concerns early, as well as a way to ask more tangential questions that indulge curiosity. Thirdly, they allow me to adjust the course in real-time, clarifying points of confusion as well as adapting the structure to meet their needs better. For example, some semesters students wanted more small-group practice in explaining and applying concepts, so I added those to nearly every class; other semesters, they preferred larger discussions that I led.

In my introductory econometrics class, I confront the challenge of teaching difficult but crucial material to students who may initially find it boring or abstract. My goal, however, is to have students leave the course with a better understanding of how we use data to understand the world, particularly human decision-making. Even for students who won't use these methods often in their own careers, I want to inculcate an intuition and statistical literacy that will make them more informed consumers and judges of empirical work they read, including in less academic contexts. To that end, I have students practicing data analysis and contextualizing the results throughout the semester, a skill that cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence. I continue to return to some of the same examples throughout the semester, to provide a consistent framework, but also discuss new examples in each class for variety. I will often purposely solicit a new example from the class and work through it impromptu, so that students can see econometric ways of thinking modeled and participate in it themselves. If students only see fully worked, polished examples, it can feel inaccessible and only done by experts, so I try to bring students through the whole intellectual process from an early stage in their classes. This also helps students grasp how content fits together, a system of knowledge rather than a series of facts. In evaluations, students often "appreciate the use of real–world examples Dr. Meinzen–Dick uses to help contextualize the course content."

I extend this philosophy into my assignments, which ask students to do their own coding and analysis of data. These exercises could be somewhat formulaic (as the practice is important), so I always embed questions about interpretation and the meaning of results, with open-ended questions asking students to

think about the limitations of our analysis and brainstorm ways to solve potential problems. In general, assignments provide scaffolding for students to learn how to apply economic modes of thinking and practice their analytic skills, while building their confidence. Assignments are simultaneously an arena for students to learn as well as assess their progress; I prompt students to explain their reasoning and justify their thought process, as these metacognitive skills will carry forward into lifelong learning.

The first semester I taught introductory econometrics, I was only able to cover multiple linear regression and its many problems, but didn't have time to cover the clever solutions applied economists use in causal research. This left students wanting more. In later iterations, I condensed and focused so that I could cover two of these 'solutions' (Difference-in-Differences and Instrumental Variables) at an intuitive level. Students now end the semester enthused about econometrics and ready to use its tools in future courses. These include a senior capstone I teach, on the political economy of the Global South. I conceive of this course as giving students a taste of doing academic work, when most of their other courses are about consuming it. I have structured the course to bridge this gap: I start by lecturing on causal inference methods used in quasi-experimental settings. Each week, we then read an academic paper that uses the method applied to a topic; to begin, I provide strategies for approaching scholarly articles, but by the end of the semester students are confident in reading and discussing papers. I assign the students structured replications to practice coding and analysis but also go beyond what the paper does, much as they will have to do in their capstone project. Students discover how the textbook ideal confronts the messy realities of data. Seeing this in published papers prepares them for when their own project falls short of the high expectations they set for themselves. But these projects are deeply fulfilling, for the students and for me in guiding them: they apply the methods to questions of their own, and advance the state of knowledge (however incrementally). Students mention, in their evaluations and in notes to me, that it "made [them] enjoy research and learning": the most valuable feedback I could receive.

My high standards, combined with support for students to meet them, are held with the goal of developing students' identities as scholar-learners. I model my own passion for the content I teach, which students respond positively to ("Dr. Meinzen–Dick is very passionate about econometrics and her energy is inspiring for a traditionally boring class."). This passion is not only for my own sub-field, but also for bringing economic frameworks to everyday life. I prioritize engaging students in the process of knowledge creation, exploring how research actually gets done in practice; this includes the emotional challenges of the research process. By explicitly acknowledging these emotional reactions and normalizing them, I create room for the students to bring their whole selves to the classroom. I also highlight work by women and scholars of color, so that all students see themselves represented in research. However, I recognize that not all students will become researchers, so I continually emphasize the role of economics in shaping public policy. My goal is that all my students go on to be informed citizens and media consumers who can understand the policies that affect them and others around the world.

As a teacher who values diversity and learning, I make it a goal to meet students where they are and create the conditions for them to learn. This also makes a more inclusive classroom, where students from all backgrounds feel they have the tools to succeed and that their lived experiences are valued contributions. Particularly in an uncertain world shaped by the pandemic, I prioritize creating personal connections and a supportive environment. I use multiple communication tools: quick polls in class to check comprehension, extensive written feedback on drafts of papers, enthusiastic responses to questions in class (soliciting additional questions regularly), meetings outside of class, as well as daily check-ins.

As one student wrote in their evaluation, "She is extremely kind and flexible. I feel like she genuinely wants everyone to succeed. She is amazing at encouraging people to ask questions."

I also am an accessible teacher, which helps students feel comfortable and supported enough with me to take a chance on going beyond their academic comfort zone. Students choose to work next to me in my office hours, so they can raise questions as they occur; I use this time to encourage peer learning as well. Explaining the same concepts they have just learned to their classmates, under my watchful eye, solidifies their new knowledge and provides instant reinforcement of their mastery. However, I have also added other avenues of communication, to include the whole class. For example, I distribute rubrics for projects, to clarify my expectations in advance even for students who don't feel comfortable coming to me. All of these practices are ways I address the hidden curriculum, which not all students arrive knowing; by being extremely transparent with my expectations and providing the support for students to meet them, I know all students are on an equal footing and can achieve the deeper connection with the material that I aim for.

Course Title	Sections	Enrollment	Area	Mean
Senior Capstone	3	37	Hard Work Required	4.8
			Intellectually Stimulating	4.8
			Learned Great Deal	4.8
			Quality of Instruction	4.8
			Overall Value of Course	4.8
Intro to Econometrics	9	172	Hard Work Required	4.8
			Intellectually Stimulating	4.4
			Learned Great Deal	4.5
			Quality of Instruction	4.5
			Overall Value of Course	4.3
Development Economics	1	236	Overall educational value (course)	4.3
			Intellectual content (course)	4.3
			Overall teaching effectiveness	4.3
			Preparation and organization	4.4
			Enthusiasm	4.7
Econ of Global Poverty (TA)	5	73	was approachable	4.9
			was organized and prepared	4.7
			overall did a good job	4.7
			was available and helpful	4.9
			helped me understand concepts	4.6

Table 1: Summary of Course and Teacher Evaluations at Villanova University (Senior Capstone and Intro to Econometrics) and UC Davis (Development Economics and Economics of Global Poverty).