

## Teaching Statement | Paul Le Tran<sup>1</sup>

### *Teaching Philosophy*

As a student of economics for over a decade, the field has always fascinated me by how its methods, models, and tools have allowed me to better and more deeply understand the world around me. From my first classes in introductory macroeconomics through today as I pursue a career in researching and teaching economics, the economic mindset has fundamentally changed how I approach problems, make decisions, and interact with others in my everyday life. In particular, the economic mindset is a powerful framework that can help guide people in tackling difficult problems and making important decisions. With how transformative this field has been for my life, I believe my career in teaching economics is only successful if I am able to foster this thought process in my students.

My core enthusiasm for teaching economics is in large part thanks to my professors at Pomona College, my alma mater. Combined with their passion and patience, the teaching methods of the faculty always allowed for students like myself to understand the details of economic concepts and models through detailed explanations. What truly motivated me to dive deeper into economics were how the professors never discouraged students from asking questions and always made the effort to explicitly connect the concepts in class with relevant empirical applications and different perspectives. It was this fostering of a liberal arts education that resulted in my PhD studies in economics at the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin).

Through these experiences and my time as a teacher, I have developed my teaching philosophy built upon three pillars that allow me to effectively foster the economic way of thinking in my students. First, I aim to provide students with a solid understanding of economic tools, techniques, and concepts, but present this knowledge recognising that students learn in heterogeneous ways. Second, my teaching always encourages students to continue their learning about economics outside of the classroom. I want my students to realise that the course materials are not just academic exercises, but can be used as a lens through which economists explain real world phenomena. Third, I strive to establish a strong and open line of communication with my students, both in and out of the classroom.

### *Teaching Experience*

During my time as an economics PhD student at UT Austin, I have had the opportunity to serve as an Assistant Instructor (AI) for my own course. Specifically, I have taught Introduction to Macroeconomics in both small class rooms and large lecture halls for three semesters. As evidence for my strong teaching, my evaluations across all semesters have been held in high regard

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Economics, The University of Texas at Austin. 2225 Speedway, BRB 2.128, C3100, Austin, TX 78712, USA. Email: [pltran@utexas.edu](mailto:pltran@utexas.edu). Website: <https://paulletran.com/>.

by students.

My responsibilities as an AI for Introduction to Macroeconomics included planning the course curriculum, preparing lecture notes and presentations, writing and grading all problem sets and exams, designating the responsibilities of my teaching assistants to best help my students, and issuing final grades. My goal for the course was to provide students with a well-rounded introduction to macroeconomics: by the end of every semester, I wanted my students to have an understanding of tools and modelling techniques used in the field, apply these techniques to rigorously understand macroeconomic concepts and develop students' critical thought processes, and see the relevancy of the course materials for studying current events outside of the class room. Fostering an environment conducive to learning is a necessity for accomplishing these goals in my courses. Because the concepts taught in Introduction to Macroeconomics can feel abstract for students for the first time, it's easy for them to become disengaged with the course material and question its relevancy. To combat against these issues, I conduct my lectures such that they explain the course material to students using methods stemming from the three pillars of my philosophy.

To ensure a solid understanding for diverse learners, I craft my slides to primarily summarise the most important details from the assigned textbook for each taught chapter. This method prevents students from using the textbook inefficiently since the slides can always be used as a starting point to determining which main topic in the chapter requires detailed revision from the textbook. I also supplement the textbook information with verbal explanations during lectures that come from either my own research and education or the publication of others, but with less economic jargon. Because my research centres on applications of text analysis in macroeconomics, I recognise the importance of understanding how meaning conveyed is easily changed by language, especially with how economics is a field that is precise with its communications. I have found that this supplemental information often helps many students better understand course topics in a less abstract manner. The third tool I employ during my lectures to both provide students with more angles to understand the material and elicit active participation is to integrate plenty of technical examples into my lectures. For instance, the step-by-step visual examples I show students about the effects of different shocks to the curves of the Aggregate Demand-Aggregate Supply (ADAS) Model have consistently been cited by students as helpful for exam revision.

To encourage students to learn and recognise the impact of macroeconomics outside of the classroom, I explicitly connect course material to current events, such as dedicating lecture time to explain how the Federal Reserve Board's communication help shape expectations of consumers, firms, and financial markets. I also frequently begin lectures with a small discussion of important economic data releases, such as reports on the unemployment rate or GDP growth rate. These deliberate connections help students understand that the macroeconomic models and concepts taught in the classroom aren't just abstract ideas, but are actively relevant and used in the real world by

economists.

Finally, to foster open communication with and amongst students, I first employ formative assessment methods to provide students a variety of “low-stakes” and stimulating mediums for reinforcing lessons taught in lecture. Specifically, I “gamify” quizzes via Kahoots throughout every chapter. With their vibrant colours, music, and points system, Kahoots give students reinforcement learning without the stress of pop quizzes. Furthermore, collaboration is encouraged during Kahoots, allowing students to be more connected with their peers. Ultimately, I believe I have been successful in igniting interests and a deeper understanding in economics amongst students, as I have routinely received feedback (both in my end-of-semester evaluations and informally outside of class) highlighting my efforts as a positive factor towards their interests in the field. I also ensure communication extends beyond the class room via office hours and emails because I understand some students better learn in different environments. Specifically, I encourage students to ask any questions through e-mail (which I do my best to answer in-depth then and there) or request of office hours through appointment if they need one-on-one help. Whilst I regularly hold two to three hours of office hours every week, I always schedule extra office hours that accommodate students’ schedule conflicts. I believe my efforts for accessibility have been successful as students frequently highlight these factors as strong points of my teaching.

### *Teaching Interests*

At the undergraduate level, I would enjoy teaching both introductory and intermediate macroeconomics and microeconomics, with a preference for the macroeconomic sequence. Building on my own research interests, an undergraduate course I would be particularly excited to develop is at the intersection of macroeconomics, machine learning, and text analysis. Having seen how even brief explanations of the Federal Reserve Board’s communication strategies can engage students in introductory courses, I am confident that a full course dedicated to these modern empirical methods would be highly valuable for students. With modern economic research becoming more interested in how institutional text communication affects economic outcomes such as expectations formation, empirical macroeconomics needs advanced methods to this complex, high-dimensional, and unstructured data. I am confident that a full course dedicated to teaching how these empirical methods can be used would be highly valuable for students. Several key techniques I would want to teach for this course include sentiment analysis, topic modelling, and word frequency.

### *Student Numerical Evaluations and Comments*

UT Austin requests students to provide an anonymous evaluation of their TAs at the conclusion of each course. Part of this evaluation is a standardised, numerical portion where for each question asked, students provide a score between 1 and 5 to represent their level of agreement, with 5

being the strongest. Across all semesters taught, I have received an average numerical score of 4.6 for Introductory Macroeconomics with a total of 216 students. Additionally, students have the opportunity to supplement the former section with written comments. In this section, my students have provided comments such as, “The subject matter of the course could be quite difficult at times but Professor Tran was quite excellent at explaining the concepts in a simple and understandable way” and “I love when Dr. Tran connects what we’re learning about to relevant real world issues. It’s great to hear his perspective. I appreciate that he is always sensitive to other’s political beliefs in these discussions... I hope he continues to talk about real world topics in class! I’ve learned a lot about the intersection of policy and macroeconomics that I will take with me beyond this course. I really appreciate how involved and passionate Dr. Tran is about the subjects he teaches”. Student sentiment such as these externally support the claim that students leave my lectures with an understanding of economics that they can apply to their lives both in and out of academia. It is this transformative impact on students that I am eager to continue fostering my career in teaching economics.