

Teaching Statement: Thomas J. Durfee

My excitement for teaching comes from the joy of empowering my students to flourish. My goal is to cultivate an environment where students can explore economics and policy in ways that interest them and speak to their values and experiences. I encourage my students to explore by giving them the attention they need to grow, even in large classes. I combine new teaching technologies with compassion by giving my students the structure to learn in the style that best suits them, freeing them to ask more questions and engage.

Sometimes rephrasing a problem is enough to allow a student to make a connection, but it requires that I actively engage with students and pay attention to their needs. When I was a Teaching Assistant at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, I worked for a principles of economics class. While I prepared discussion topics for our lab session, I quickly discovered that the most important role I could perform was to clarify something that was unclearly worded in the textbook, or to explain why the shortcuts that they learned for one tool may not apply to another. I also made spreadsheets for interactive graphs full of examples to cover this material in new ways, and to colorfully organize each step of the solution. As a PhD student, I have been instructor of record for an introductory Microsoft Excel skills class. I designed and produced an online class with interactive material for my students. Even though the class is largely self guided, I designed assignments with open ended questions as a means to check in. Sometimes all students need is for me to present the material in a new way so that they can make a connection, but this requires that I actively listen and pay attention to their needs and questions.

I tailored my course content to pique the interests of my students. This helped students make new connections and learn to use the tools of my class. During my TA sessions, many students asked for applications of economic tools that were not related to finance. Instead of limiting the budget constraint curve to money and finance, I changed the discussion topic to explore the optimal allocation of hemoglobin and platelets from a blood bank, since it is still a kind of constrained optimization problem that does not need to include currency. I let the students propose subjects they would find valuable and taught by framing our discussions around those topics.

I design my classes to actively interrogate competing literature as a platform to apply my lessons. After the principles of economics class, I served as the teaching assistant for a master's level applied economics class. This course applied the tools from the principles of microeconomics class and econometrics class to study policy on race and crime in America. In addition to my TA duties, I guest lectured for this class on a paper that used race as an instrument for voting behavior to explain variation in gun violence. Many students disagreed with the author's use of this instrument – as did I – but we used this as an opportunity to discuss the state of the literature and to reinforce their understanding of econometric methods from their other classes. I don't

want students to copy my views, but I want them to use new tools to explore their points of view. As an educator, I will give my students the support and the structure to learn the way they need.

I quickly learn new educational technology and skills to ensure consistent quality course content that is accessible and inclusive. In 2019 I converted my 30 student lab class on Microsoft Excel into a 170 student online class. I learned the skills necessary to record instructional videos, produce them, and caption them to ensure accessibility of my course. This involved learning new software and best practices for audio engineering, video processing, and closed captioning. As I learned more, I reviewed my past material and continued to review and improve the class.

Technology can also be a tool for compassion in the classroom. In 2020 and 2021, I adapted my course to allow for the needed flexibility of living through a pandemic and a series of National Guard curfews in Minneapolis. My goal as an educator was not just to lecture, but to give my students a sense of stability. Prerecording my classes freed up time for me to check in with students. Students told me they appreciated that I used my time to check in with them, and they were comforted that my class was one thing in their lives that wasn't changing.

I actively contribute to my whole educational community. As a part of the university education team, I shared my online content knowledge with others. When the President of the university announced that in-person classes would be suspended in March 2020, I made an instructional video for faculty to know the basics of how to record instructional material, how to load it into our specific online course management infrastructure, and to share some of the best practices I had learned for making online content. I shared my tools so other instructors could do their best.

During my master's program, I taught economic methods to energetic policy students and made lesson plans that adapted to their interests rather than just teaching from the textbook. As an instructor, I bring energy, skills, and empathy to ensure that all of my students grow and learn. I carefully plan my lectures and tools so that students can learn core concepts in their own way, give time for critical thinking, and check in during class time.

Even though I am a graduate student, last year I was asked to serve on the honors committee of a former undergraduate student. She wanted to explore a dynamic labor economic model that went beyond the core curriculum of our department. I met with her regularly and helped her develop a testable hypothesis and guided her to make choices that allowed her to express her point of view as a researcher. After she presented, I shook her hand and said "I look forward to having a new colleague." I want to be there for more students as they explore and learn.

I discovered my love of teaching when I was a camp counselor. We had a camper who needed help to learn to swim well enough to be allowed on the aqua-trampoline. I was asked to mentor him over the week. I stuck with him, listened to him, and helped him stay calm so he could practice. I tested him later in the week, and watched him pass. I remember watching him on the last day of camp, playing with his friends on the aqua-trampoline. This is why I teach.