Trinh Pham | Teaching Statement

During graduate school, I had the opportunity to develop my philosophy on teaching through my experience being a teaching assistant for two undergraduate courses in development economics (both introductory and advanced), and three graduate courses in research methods and applied econometrics, as well as an instructor for the statistics camp for incoming graduate students, including three courses taught online/hybrid during the pandemic. These diverse experiences yield the overriding principle that I strive for in the classroom: clarity in presenting materials and in detailing course expectations.

Clarity in presenting materials

My goal in teaching economics is to equip students with the capability to develop a big picture of the world's issues and couple that picture with the related conceptual framework, mathematical language, and statistical tools by which we study, explain, and analyze the causal structure of economic phenomena.

I find the most effective method of teaching is to distribute lecture notes and slides, as well as assign relevant readings before each lecture. These materials must be self-contained, precise, and concise. This does not mean that I equate clarity with simplicity. Simplistic explanations often create more misunderstandings than do organized lectures that carefully present nuances and complexities of most economic concepts, especially in low-income settings where textbook economic assumptions do not always hold. Take cash transfers and in-kind transfers to the poor—a fundamental question in the social protection literature—as an example. Standard economic models predict households will (weakly) prefer cash to in-kind transfers because cash allows flexibility to beneficiaries in how it is spent. As a result, students might believe that cash transfers are always welfare-enhancing as a policy. In the presence of commodity price risk, however, in-kind transfers might be welfare-improving to beneficiaries relative to cash under certain conditions (e.g., marginal utility of income is positively correlated with prices) because they serve as an insurance against price fluctuations (Gadenne et al. 2021).

Therefore, it is important to point students to additional references at a detailed level, showing where each topic is explained, and when possible, including up-to-date research on the topics. Using textbooks that cover the major topics of the course is useful for both students who are new to the basic concepts, as well as those who have some background and want to deepen their knowledge. As for technical parts, providing precise references is beneficial to both students that are easily discouraged by mathematical concepts, and those inclined to delve further into the technical details.

To prompt students to better grasp and apply the analytical tools and concepts covered in class, I complement my lecture notes with homework assignments. As an applied microeconomist, I also view empirical experience, in particular familiarity with basic challenges and tools involved in using data, as one of the important toolkits of economics students. I incorporate into most of my courses beyond the introductory level an empirical component in which students learn how to deal with data cleaning and analysis. For upper-level and graduate-level courses, I find it especially useful for students to work in a group to replicate and interpret the results from recently published articles, as well as to extend the analysis based on their genuine interests. This practice not only enhances

students' knowledge of the literature and technical materials, but also gives them a flavor of what economic research is like. Detailed and clear solutions to these homework assignments (both theoretical and empirical, including coding practices) will significantly aid the student's understanding of the matter and their learning process.

Clarity in detailing course expectations

My own experience, both as a student and as a teaching assistant, suggests that students who are unclear about expectations can easily get lost in the learning process. I strive to clarify and frequently remind students, both in my syllabus and each class session, of the expectations I have for them. I want students to understand that learning does not mean skimming through lecture notes or problem sets or remembering enough to pass a test. I want students to master the materials so that when they take exams, they are confident they will do well by applying the concepts they have learned to a wide variety of situations. This requires students to know not just the specific details of the materials we have covered, but also how those details connect to the broader topics we have studied throughout the course.

For them to obtain this kind of mastery, I make certain that students know that they are expected to ask questions. I learned and practiced this firsthand during courses where I led weekly tutorial sessions in which I went over class materials and discussed selected assignment problems. To make the most out of each tutorial session, I carefully observed students in class to learn which parts of the lectures they did not seem comfortable with so that I could provide additional instruction. I encouraged them to send questions and problems that they do not understand via email in advance, to take advantage of my office hours or to make appointments with me if the schedule did not work for them. I responded to emails on the day I received them. If there were any live questions that I was not certain of giving a correct answer to in a session, I made sure to take notes and respond to them at the beginning of the next session or via email.

Expecting the same level of excitement and involvement from all students, however, would be unrealistic, and I learned from my own experience that this is especially challenging in courses where students have different levels of math backgrounds. To make sure that no students are left behind, I will prepare at the beginning of the semester a transparent course syllabus with detailed outline of each lecture, and sufficient supporting materials to allow students to stay organized and learn the basic concepts even if they are unable to participate in tutorial sessions or office hours.

Given that exams are a main mode of evaluation and students' performance on the exams is frequently their main concern in the course, I clarify contents by distributing study guides outlining the specific concepts as well as the broader principles that the test will cover. I also recommend specific problems from the textbooks/assignments and provide a copy of the previous year's exam so students can gauge the level of difficulty of the exam. In addition, as a firm believer that high-stake exam performances do not necessarily reflect students' ability and knowledge, I offer students the flexibility to decide on how their final scores are calculated before their final exam. For example, students can choose to allocate more weight to homework assignments and midterms if they believe they do better on these components than on final exam.

Finally, I have also learned that arbitrary classroom rules including a rigid set of guidelines such as the format of assignment submissions, or penalization for deviation from specified rules might

discourage students from learning. By showing respect for the ability of students to use discretion where possible, my courses become less time-consuming and more focused in the interests of students, which is their comprehension and mastery of the subject material at hand.

My teaching interests

My main teaching interests lie in the field of development, environmental economics and econometrics. At the graduate level, I would naturally be inclined to teach development microeconomics, research methods, impact evaluation methods, and applied econometrics. At the undergraduate level, I would be additionally excited to teach courses in environmental and resource economics, as well as labor markets in developing countries.

References

Gadenne, L., Norris, S., Singhal, M., & Sukhtankar, S. (2021). *In-kind transfers as insurance* (No. w28507). National Bureau of Economic Research.