

Teaching Statement

Valeria Zurla*

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One of the reasons I chose and was able to pursue a PhD in economics was the great teachers I encountered during my career as a student. Having witnessed the impact of great teachers and advisors along my way, I was inspired to pursue this career.

My teaching experience began while I was completing my Master's Degree at Bocconi University. I served as a teaching assistant for the *Empirical Research Methods* class, an undergraduate-level class to teach students the empirical methods used to conduct rigorous applied economic research while at the same time discussing policy-relevant applications and research questions. This class made me excited about teaching and is an example of what I think an excellent class in economics should do: provide students with analytical thinking and rigorous statistical methods while never forgetting about real-life problems and policy-relevant examples. The class also allowed me to help students develop their research projects. Advising students on research ideas and follow them through the research process was extremely rewarding as I could have a real impact in the realization of very interesting and valuable research work.

During my experience at Brown, I had the opportunity to teach, for two years, an introductory level class in *Statistics and Microeconomics* for first years MPA students. The experience has been crucial in my development as a teacher. MPA students are often heterogeneous in backgrounds, difficulties, and needs. Being the teaching assistant for this class helped me understand the importance of adapting my teaching to different students and situations and pushed me to constantly find new ways to explain the most relevant and complex concepts. It has also shown me the value of teaching as a researcher: I have received challenging questions, often about concepts taken for granted, that have advanced the way I present key ideas and my understanding of basic economic notions.

My experiences have shaped my teaching philosophy around three main points. First, I believe that the most effective way to teach economics, develop students' intuitions, analytical and critical thinking, is always to link the explanations of concepts to real-world examples. This has been proven to be the primary tool to keep students' engagement high, instilling the ability to answer economic

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questions and develop students' curiosity and research skills. My experience as a teaching assistant for Professor Friedman, Oster, and Steinberg taught me different ways to do this, from introducing each topic with policy-relevant examples, integrating discussions and debates between students into classes, and always shape problem sets and exams around real-world problems.

Second, I believe that fostering collaboration among students is crucial and very effective in helping them understand different concepts. While sometimes challenging, it can promote critical thinking and growth. The diversity in the ways students learn is an asset also for teachers, as students themselves often provide new and interesting points of view and perspectives on how to think about different concepts. I learned that integrating collaboration in the class structure through group projects and problem sets has enormous returns for the students' learning experience.

The last essential ingredient for effective teaching is careful course preparation and particularly finding the right balance between engaging students while still teaching rigorous theoretical and statistical material. I invest much time in course preparation and planning. I carefully consider how to present the most important notions in the most effective way and when and how to refer to real-world examples to maximize their ability to help understand, and remember concepts. Lecture notes should be detailed and self-contained and I find it extremely helpful to distribute them in advance to help students follow and participate more during the class. Finally, I believe it is imperative to ask for students' feedback along the way and not only at the end of the semester in order to tailor the learning experience to each specific cohort of students: things that may work well with some students may not be as effective in a different year and setting and it is essential to adapt the class in order to be able to teach in the most effective way. This has proven particularly helpful during remote teaching due to the pandemic, which, if on the one hand was challenging in terms of teaching, on the other hand, helped me find new and exciting ways to teach and keep students engaged.

My main teaching interests lie in the field of public economics, labor economics, and applied research methods. At the graduate level, I would be excited to teach public economics. If given the opportunity, I would design a course on public economics with a focus on the optimal design of social programs and welfare analysis, integrating relevant papers at the frontier of research. At the undergraduate level, I would be happy to teach classes related to policy evaluation, public economics, gender economics. It would be great to teach a class on how to use big data to solve economic and social problems, along the lines of John Friedman's class at Brown and Raj Chetty's class at Harvard, particularly because this type of class has proven effective in attracting women and minorities to economics.

Course: Summer2019MPA2455/2460: MPA2455/2460 Summer19 Statistics for Public Policy
Instructor: John Friedman,Emily Oster
TA: Ilise Hamilton,Valeria Zurla *
Response Rate: 33/60 (55.00 %)

1 - Reflecting on your experiences with your teaching assistant in the following course contexts: class or online discussion sections, laboratory, field trips, recitation, tutoring or office hours, and/or course communications; please indicate your agreement with each of the following prompts on a scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Select N/A if not applicable to your experience with TAs in this course.

My teaching assistant was consistently prepared.

Response Option	Weight	Frequency	Percent	Percent Responses	Means			
Strongly Agree	(5)	26	89.66%					
Agree	(4)	3	10.34%					
Neutral	(3)	0	0.00%					
Disagree	(2)	0	0.00%					
Strongly Disagree	(1)	0	0.00%					
N/A	(0)	0	0.00%					
				0 25 50 100	Question	Brown University		
Response Rate	Mean	STD	Median	Brown University		Mean	STD	Median
29/60 (48.33%)	4.90	0.31	5.00	117		4.63	0.65	5.00

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My teaching assistant effectively engaged students (e.g. encouraged student participation; was responsive to questions; offered opportunities for discussion in pairs or small groups).

Response Option	Weight	Frequency	Percent	Percent Responses	Means			
Strongly Agree	(5)	27	93.10%					
Agree	(4)	2	6.90%					
Neutral	(3)	0	0.00%					
Disagree	(2)	0	0.00%					
Strongly Disagree	(1)	0	0.00%					
N/A	(0)	0	0.00%					
				0 25 50 100	Question	Brown University		
Response Rate	Mean	STD	Median	Brown University		Mean	STD	Median
29/60 (48.33%)	4.93	0.26	5.00	117		4.50	0.88	5.00

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My teaching assistant was responsive to students (e.g. was available during office hours; was responsive to questions; was responsive to requests to meet).

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Strongly Agree	(5)	27	93.10%					
Agree	(4)	2	6.90%					
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Disagree	(2)	0	0.00%					
Strongly Disagree	(1)	0	0.00%					
N/A	(0)	0	0.00%					
				0 25 50 100	Question	Brown University		
Response Rate	Mean	STD	Median	Brown University		Mean	STD	Median
29/60 (48.33%)	4.93	0.26	5.00	117		4.56	0.78	5.00

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My teaching assistant made content clear and understandable.

Response Option	Weight	Frequency	Percent	Percent Responses	Means			
Strongly Agree	(5)	28	96.55%					
Agree	(4)	1	3.45%					
Neutral	(3)	0	0.00%					
Disagree	(2)	0	0.00%					
Strongly Disagree	(1)	0	0.00%					
N/A	(0)	0	0.00%					
				0 25 50 100	Question	Brown University		
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29/60 (48.33%)	4.97	0.19	5.00	117		4.54	0.75	5.00




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My teaching assistant provided clear feedback on assignments that improved my learning.

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Strongly Agree	(5)	28	96.55%					
Agree	(4)	1	3.45%					
Neutral	(3)	0	0.00%					
Disagree	(2)	0	0.00%					
Strongly Disagree	(1)	0	0.00%					
N/A	(0)	0	0.00%					
				0 25 50 100	Question	Brown University		
Response Rate	Mean	STD	Median	Brown University		Mean	STD	Median
29/60 (48.33%)	4.97	0.19	5.00	118		4.49	0.85	5.00

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Overall, I rate this teaching assistant as effective.

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2 - What has been particularly effective about this teaching assistant's approach to teaching in this course?

Response Rate 15/60 (25%)

- Positive mindset
- Valeria was amazing! She would make an excellent professor.
- everything
- Valeria was kind, considerate, empathetic, clear, communicative, and generally the best? She was always ready to clarify questions and made sure we all understood what was going on. She went above and beyond consistently, and I would attribute a large portion of my success in this course to Valeria!
- I love Valeria. Her willingness to level with students and have special review sessions was so helpful and provided an important second voice on Friday review classes.
- She explained everything in a way that wasn't rushed and clearly communicated what we needed to know. She was extremely patient as well.
- Valeria was extremely helpful and friendly, and open to our many questions and confusions about the course. She should absolutely be a part of this program again next year if she is available.
- Valeria is incredible! Her review sessions were very helpful and she was always willing to answer questions. We were very lucky to have her!
- section was mostly useful. should have been mandatory for all students.
- the review session and office hours are very helpful
- Patience.
- Her patience.
- she was open to questions and made a strong effort to help students
- Valeria is excellent at teaching and at engaging each student. It was very effective to have course material reviewed during the Friday review session by someone other than the professors. Valeria was very accessible after every class. She also went above and beyond ad meet with me individually twice for about an hour each time to go over material I did not understand. She was very welcoming and answered everyone's questions as best she could.
- She broke things down in very relatable ways and clarified things when they had been left vague by either professor.

3 - What specific advice would you have for this teaching assistant about changes that would enhance your learning?

Response Rate 11/60 (18.33%)

- N/A. Valeria was amazing and did a fantastic job.
- nothing
- 0 changes. Literally 0. Truly the best part about first term was Valeria. She's an Microeconomics icon
- Better handwriting.
- No changes.
- none
- Nothing! great teacher, sometimes put up with distractions but i think helped those individuals
- N/A
- maintain the same approach
- I would recommend that she hold office hours as she is excellent at explaining material!
- Writing and spacing things out on the white board could be better.