Statement of Teaching Experience and Philosophy

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I regularly teach three classes at the Sanford School of Public Policy:

- A section of our core principles of microeconomics class, which every student declaring a major in Public Policy Studies major must take (enrollment capped at 50),
- A seminar on the Microeconomics of International Development Policy for upper-level undergraduates and graduate students (enrollment capped at 18), and
- A seminar on Law, Economics, and Organization for upper-level undergraduates and graduate students (enrollment capped at 18).

I have also taught two additional courses since joining Duke, which I discuss below.

Philosophy and Goals

The core of my teaching philosophy is my belief in the important role college plays in forming responsible citizens. Parallel to one of the themes of my research agenda (i.e., the improved identification of causal relationships), I often tell my students that one the most important critical thinking skills – if not *the* most important such skill – is the ability to question the causal statements one is presented with.

Indeed, we often hear it said that correlation is not causation, but my goal is to get students to understand that knowing whether X actually causes Y is difficult and requires a great deal of thinking. In other words, one cannot simply base policy decisions (and many other important decisions, for that matter) on the basis of mere correlations.

To that end, the first things I teach after the introduction in the seminars I teach for upper-level undergraduates and Masters of Public Policy (MPP) students are (i) a primer on linear regression, given that the technique is the workhorse of social science epistemology and our students have a wide variety of statistical preparations, and (ii) a rough guide to what is required in order to make causal claims, especially when one only has access to observational (i.e., nonexperimental) data.

In addition, I believe that one of the important roles we have to play as academics is that of fostering future researchers. This is why I have coauthored or am coauthoring with students at all levels – undergraduate, MPP, and PhD. Indeed, my forthcoming *Journal of Development Studies* article was coauthored with Ken Lee, an honors student; my award-winning 2010 *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* article was coauthored with Zack Brown, then a PhD student at Duke; and my working paper on female genital cutting in The Gambia was written with Tara Steinmetz, one of my MPP advisees.

Lastly, I know from experience that another important skill throughout one's professional life is the ability to write clearly, along with the ability to concisely distill a large quantity of information. I thus take every occasion I have to teach my students how to write not only clearly and concisely, but also to teach them how to write well and keep their readers interested. I have also written a short style guide for my students, which I update every semester and give to the students enrolled in the seminars I teach on development and law and economics.

Strategy and Approaches

As regards my insistence on disentangling correlation and causation, I follow up my lecture on regression and causality with a problem set in which my students are faced with a set of empirical results which they have to discuss. Perhaps more importantly, they also have to assess whether one can reasonably make a causal claim about the impact of the variable of interest on some outcome within those empirical results. This usually makes students realize that acquiring knowledge in the social sciences is no mean feat, and it gives them the right amount of skepticism regarding the findings they are presented with in ulterior readings throughout the semester.

As regards my insistence on clear and concise writing, I have the students in my seminars write two policy memos. The first one is rather conventional and asks students for their informed opinion. For example, I would ask them whether we should impose a cap on the damages awarded for medical malpractice. The second is more controversial, and asks students to specifically take a controversial position on a specific issue. For example, I would ask them to argue in favor of genetically modified crops. I then have them write a research paper on a topic of their own choosing. Beyond the usual requirements for a term paper, I also tell my students that they will be graded on their ability to keep their reader interested.

In my principles of microeconomics class, I adopt different strategies. The first such measure is the use of *weekly feedback cards*, or mini evaluations. Early on in my tenure track, a senior colleague suggested asking students to fill out feedback cards at the end of every week. Those feedback cards have four questions: 1. Clearest concept this week, 2. Most unclear concept this week, 3. Thing I liked most this week, and 4. Thing I liked least this week. I had been using those cards in both my seminars, but I decided to use them in that class in the spring of 2012. This has allowed me to make on-the-fly adjustments to my teaching, therefore making me a significantly better teacher.

The second such measure is *individual meetings*. I schedule one-on-one meetings early in the semester with every student enrolled in my principles of microeconomics course, following the advice of one of my senior colleagues. I began holding these individual meetings for the first time last spring, asking each student where they were from, what courses they had taken, what they wanted to get out of my course, where they saw themselves in five or ten years, and so on. Perhaps more importantly, I assured each student that I was there to help them learn the principles of microeconomics, and that they should always feel comfortable talking to me about whatever issues they encountered in the class. Well over 90 percent of the students took me up on the offer to meet with me individually, and although it is difficult to make a causal claim here, I believe this contributed to a climate in which students knew that I care not only about whether they learn something, but also about their overall well-being in the context of my class.

The third such measure is to conduct *in-class experiments*. For the first lecture, I wanted to show students that trade usually improves welfare, so I got a number of cheap trinkets (e.g., a princess wand, a Spiderman puzzle, a toy gun, etc.) at the dollar store and randomly distributed those trinkets to my students. I asked them to record their "happiness" with their trinket on a scale of 1 to 10 and computed the class total. I then told them to take five minutes to trade with other students, making sure they understood that these had to be voluntary trades. Once all trade opportunities had been exhausted, we computed the class total "happiness" once more, and it was almost magical to see students immediately understand how markets can indeed make everyone better off. I ran two additional experiments in lecture. The first was a simple supply and demand experiment aimed at showing how prices form without any kind of coordination. The second was the same supply-and-demand experiment, but with a tax so as to illustrate the distribution of a tax burden.

Strategy and Approaches

I attach my most recent teaching evaluations (Microeconomics of International Development for Fall 2011; Microeconomic Policy Tools for Spring 2012; and Law, Economics, and Organization for Spring 2012). My most recent instructor quality ratings were:

- 4.7 out of 5 in my development seminar (Fall 2011),
- 4.2 out of 5 in my core principles of microeconomics course (Spring 2012), and
- 4.7 out of 5 in my law and economics seminar (Spring 2012).