

Cassandra M. Benson
Teaching Philosophy Statement

My teaching experience includes instructing my own course, providing weekly recitation sections as a Teaching Assistant, working one-on-one with students as a tutor, and providing econometric advice to undergraduate thesis students. This combination of experience has shaped and molded my student-centric teaching philosophy. My teaching decisions are motivated by my understanding of how people learn. Learning is the process of assimilating and integrating new information and the application of that new information. A successful learning situation requires that I not only provide my students the necessary skills to master the material of the course, but also requires the development of critical thinking skills which can be applied in future courses, future careers, and future evolving life goals. I consider learning and the acquisition of knowledge to be the fundamental building block of a well-functioning society. And I place a significant emphasis of my own personal identity in my commitment to ensuring my students are learning.

As an instructor I value the personal growth and development of each individual student. I see my role to be that of a facilitator to aid the growth of my students. I focus my teaching on helping my students achieve their life goals. In addition, I view myself as an instigator of social reform. I firmly believe education can be used as a tool to (1) equip individuals with the necessary life skills to succeed, (2) provide solutions to global problems including poverty, disease transmission, and food scarcity, (3) create an informed citizenry, which is necessary for a true democracy, and (4) provide opportunities to increase social mobility. Therefore, while I focus on the development of each individual student, I also focus on creating a society that is knowledgeable, caring, and willing to promote social change.

The main challenge students face when learning economics is the ability to apply a theory or model to a never-before-seen problem. I've seen that traditionally taught economics courses require students to memorize a series of facts, equations, and models. Students often are unaware of why the stylized facts of a model exist. Worse yet, students who are able to analyze the welfare effects of the theoretical models, often struggle to identify an appropriate model when asked to examine a new market. To overcome these challenges, I focus on teaching students an algorithm in which to approach problem solving. I focus on getting students to identify what information they know from the problem/question, recognize how that information relates to each model, and then apply the most relevant model to understand the welfare implications in a new market.

My teaching philosophy rests on the premise that my students develop lifelong skills that can be implemented and utilized in a myriad of settings. I often tell my students that my goal is not to teach my students *what* to think, but *how* to think. I strive to teach my students that the "answer" may not yet exist, and I encourage them to find their own solution using the skills and toolkits we have developed throughout the course. Ultimately, my goal is not to have my students memorize a series of stylized facts, but to generate an approach to problem solving that can be used in a variety of outlets, not just econometric analyses. Ideal students will recognize that my course is not designed to solely provide a cursory or surface understanding of economics. Rather, my course is designed to encourage critical thinking, reflection of previously held views and values, and, ultimately, newly solidified understanding of how economic theory can be applied to public policy. I see my role to be that of a facilitator to aid the growth of my students. I focus my teaching on helping students identify unresolved inquiries, motivating them to understand the underlying mechanisms, and encouraging mastery of the material.

In addition to focusing on the individual needs of each student, I pay particular attention to: (1) grade sensitive students who fail to zoom out to the broader course goals and (2) students who are unable to relinquish their previously held misconceptions. To address grade sensitive students, I emphasize that their grades are nearly meaningless in society, and that what is truly important is the skills that remain

with them beyond the scope of the course. The skills I emphasize include the ability to self-assess, written and oral presentation skills, and applying problem solving skills to new situations. To address students in the second category, I focus on providing a judgement free space in which students have a safe space to state their perceptions of policies. Without knowing what a student thinks I cannot effectively teach.

To engage students in active learning I incorporate a variety of methods. Each lecture includes in-class exercises or activities in which students advance their understanding through active engagement. In addition, I include several games throughout the semester to demonstrate concepts such as diminishing marginal product of labor, the free rider problem, and various market structures. As preparation for exams, students work in teams to play a round of “Jeopardy” as a means to practice test-like questions. These in-class exercises encourage students to learn from each other as well as obtain concentrated practice of particular concepts. In future courses, I plan to conduct student debates on social policies. Debates within the course will encourage deeper analysis and stimulate students beyond the course. An additional benefit of classroom debate is the ability to practice peer assessment. Students will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of their classmates’ debate preparation and execution. This will teach students how to peer and self-assess, which are important skills to develop for most careers.

One of my biggest concerns for students is that they don’t realize professors want students to engage outside of the classroom or visit them during office hours. To overcome these feelings, I encourage my students to attend office hours by offering nearly negligible, yet non-zero, extra credit for office hour attendance. In addition, I will require each student to attend one 10 minute meeting during the semester. This can be a time when I can offer feedback on individual progress and gain a greater understanding of the students’ goals and objectives. I am committed to working with students and mentoring them in both official and unofficial capacities. I believe my greatest impact on students comes from my one-on-one mentoring opportunities and my commitment to advance the individual objectives of my students.

To assess student growth and learning I utilize a variety of assessments including short response papers, weekly homework assignments, in class exercises, and exams. I write all exams and assignments, which require free response solutions. Free response questions provide opportunities of formative assessment that allow me to view how students approach each question. This information would be lost in a multiple choice framework. My exams and written response papers focus on authentic assessment, in which students are asked to apply theoretical models to real-world policies often currently under debate (that is, taken from recent news articles). My assessments reinforce my teaching objectives by encouraging students to apply their theoretical understanding to a market or setting they have yet to analyze previously, thereby focusing on problem solving skills.

I am committed to ensuring the success of each and every one of my students. I recognize that while every student has unique needs, there are social forces in place that necessitate additional support for individuals who identify with underrepresented groups including: women, LGBTQI, Hispanics, Blacks, lower socioeconomic status individuals, and individuals with disabilities. During my undergraduate education I took a course on “Gender and Science” in which the main focus of the course was understanding how socialization affects gender gaps in STEM fields. I recognize the importance of stereotype threats, how the classroom and office space itself, including the wall decorations, affect a student’s sense of belonging, and how women and minorities face additional hurdles due to their preconceived notions and socialization within the field. I recognize that role models are an important factor; for example, having a female instructor at the introductory level increases the likelihood of a woman remaining in economics. I hope to provide my female students a role model that they can aspire to replicate.