Teaching Statement

Rachel Sayers
Duke University

My passion for teaching began at the age of 18, when I was chosen to be a teaching assistant for an introductory summer language course for secondary students. Over the duration of the course, I was able to introduce a diverse range of students to a completely new language. I enjoyed watching my students progress as they encountered entirely new and unfamiliar information, struggling at first to learn the material but eventually embracing the new techniques to build a foundation of knowledge they could use in the future.

Although my subsequent teaching experience has been far afield from linguistics, the experience of introducing students to completely unfamiliar material provided me invaluable experience on how to break down advanced concepts and methods for even the most rudimentary learner, and it is this skill that has allowed me to excel in teaching economics.

For every economics teaching experience I have had, I enjoyed introducing students to new concepts and ideas and helping students with a diverse background use their own experiences to help improve their understanding of my material. I enjoy seeing students’ excitement as they realize the potential to use new concepts in their own lives and research. I enjoy working with struggling students to identify areas of concern and tailor a solution to their individual learning needs. And I enjoy interacting with and gaining inspiration from motivated students who seek to apply my coursework to their own lives and research.

Teaching Experience (reverse chronological order)

- Instructor of Record for Intermediate Microeconomics in 2020: Approximately 20 undergraduate students, Duke University

- Guest Instructor for Development Economics: Theory, Evidence and Policy in 2019: 2 hours of instruction, approximately 20 undergraduate students, Duke University

- Teaching Assistant for Development Economics: Theory, Evidence and Policy in 2019: 25 hours of instruction, approximately 20 undergraduate students, Duke University

- Teaching Assistant for Development Economics: Theory, Evidence and Policy in 2017: 60 hours of instruction, approximately 20 undergraduate students, Duke University

- Teaching Assistant for Development Economics: Theory, Evidence and Policy in 2016: 54 hours of instruction, approximately 20 undergraduate students, Duke University
• Teaching Assistant for IZA Short Course on Program Evaluation and Causal Inference in 2016: 32 hours of instruction, approximately 40 faculty, policy-makers, and graduate students from several African countries, IZA in Lusaka, Zambia

• Teaching Assistant for IZA Short Course on Program Evaluation and Causal Inference in 2015: 32 hours of instruction, approximately 40 faculty, policy-makers, and graduate students from several South Asian countries, IZA in Dhaka, Bangladesh

• Teaching Assistant for Introduction for Mandarin in 2009: 140 hours of instruction, approximately 40 secondary students, STARTALK, Katy ISD, Texas

Teaching Certification

• Certificate in College Teaching from Duke University, in progress

Teaching Evaluations

Informal teaching evaluations were collected for my Teaching Assistant roles for Development Economics at Duke University in Spring 2019 and Spring 2017. These evaluations were collected by the primary instructor, Robert Garlick. Below is a selection of student comments from these evaluations:

• Rachel was extremely helpful. She is very smart and always willing to be flexible with her time. Very proactive. Amazing! Best TA I've ever had.

• She is very helpful. Always easy to reach out to and willing to help. She is very knowledgeable in the research topics and techniques and is able to help guide the research process in the right direction.

• She was always willing to answer my questions - both in office hours and over email. I can’t thank her enough for her help.

• She was very accessible, didn’t necessarily give you the answers to your questions but rather made you think about them and come up with solutions on your own.

Teaching Interests

I am particularly interested in teaching classes that complement my research interests in development economics, applied microeconometrics, labor economics and health economics. I am enthusiastic about teaching students during their undergraduate, masters and doctoral coursework. Feedback from students suggests that my greatest teaching strengths are my abilities to tailor explanations and examples to fit students’ unique learning methods and experience, to identify students who require additional support and provide the necessary tools they need to
succeed, and to motivate economic lessons such that they are relevant and applicable to everyday life. I am particularly excited about teaching classes that allow me to use these skills with a diverse range of students.

**Teaching Philosophy**

My approach to teaching has evolved steadily as I have taught varied material in diverse settings. During this time, I have taught a wide range of students, from secondary students in Texas to undergraduates at Duke University to faculty, policy-makers and practitioners in Zambia and Bangladesh. These experiences have taught me the importance of a flexible and adaptable approach which tailors the classroom experience to the unique needs and preferences of each set of learners. Even so, I have found six main principles that guide how I teach, present material, and interact with students.

First, I believe that students learn best when they are presented with a clear sense of motivation for each topic or technique I teach. Prior to introducing any new material, I focus heavily on explaining why and in what situations the new topic or method is relevant. For undergraduate students, this usually means introducing an example from everyday life or current affairs that students will find interesting, while, for masters and PhD students, this typically takes the form of introducing a research question relevant to their own field and research interests. I find that investing time upfront in developing motivation improves student engagement in-class, increases retention of the new topic, and prompts students to explore the material further outside of class.

Second, I believe that a key component to student success is encouraging student interaction inside the classroom, both with me as the instructor and with other learners. As such, I design my classes to create opportunities for student involvement and provide prompting and incentives for students to participate in class. When creating slides and preparing lectures, I am always sure to add slides for discussion questions designed to gauge the class’s understanding and interpretation of new material. Furthermore, I identify sections of my lectures that are more challenging or confusing and build in time to assist students and answer their questions. I also devote time to guided class discussions, where students can answer each others’ questions and relate the material to their own experiences and research.

Third, I believe in designing my curriculum to continually assess students’ progress in order to identify students who may be struggling and intervene early on. I understand that, while many students will find coursework intuitive and manageable, many students will also struggle and need additional attention to succeed in my classes. In my experience, I have found that even students who struggle deeply with learning new economic material can succeed in class with additional attention tailored to best suit their unique learning styles. As such, I incorporate in-class discussions, quizzes, and other assignments throughout the course to continuously monitor student progress. These tools, in addition to one-on-one discussions with students before and after class and in office hours, allow me to monitor student progress and identify which students are struggling and where, so that I can provide individualized support where needed. This
approach not only allows me to aid students who are struggling, but it also allows me to improve my overall in-class presentation methods to enhance student understanding in the future.

Fourth, I believe that students do best when they have a clear intuition for each new topic or method. During my teaching experience, I have found that students are better able to utilize knowledge outside of the classroom and in their own work if they have a clear working understanding of the intuition behind a new concept. As such, I focus much of my energy on conveying the economic intuition behind my lessons and ensuring that students can explain this intuition in their own words. In my own teaching, I am sure to repeat the intuition in different ways multiple times throughout a class, often leaning on real-life examples to convey intuition in a new way. In addition, I make it a key component of student work - in discussion classes, exams, and student papers - to explain the intuition behind every key concept. I find that this constant emphasis on intuition reduces rote learning, improves student comprehension, and increases students’ ability to use the relevant skill or method in their future work.

Fifth, I believe in respecting the diversity of learners and how this diversity shapes their experience inside the classroom and interacting with the material I present. I taught a wide range of students in order to improve my teaching techniques, and I have learned much from these experiences. I have seen firsthand how race, ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic background impact how students learn and how they respond to various teaching methods. These experiences have taught me the importance of keeping an open mind and adapting my material and teaching style to better fit the needs of my audience. I truly believe that there is no one right way to teach, and I am always eager to adjust my teaching method to address my students’ needs. I continually encourage feedback from students, both formally and informally, in order to better understand their diverse learning needs and respond as needed. This adaptability and ability to accommodate various learning styles and diverse learners is a key part of my teaching philosophy.

Finally, and most importantly, I believe student success is determined in large part by their relationship with their instructor. To this end, I strive to always maintain a friendly, respectful and encouraging relationship with my students. I find that such a relationship improves students’ motivation both in my class and in their other academic pursuits. I build this relationship first in class with frequent student-teacher interaction, after class by staying late to answer questions, and outside of class by providing ample opportunity for extra interaction. In addition to regularly scheduled office hours, I make myself available for additional office hours not only to discuss coursework but also to discuss students’ other academic interests and goals. I find that cultivating genuine academic relationships with students both within and beyond the classroom provides students with the encouragement, support and guidance they need to excel. Key professors in both my undergraduate and graduate career provided me with the additional support I needed to cultivate a passion for economics, and I hope to be able to provide this same mentoring to my future students.