

# Teaching Statement

*Sebastian Laumer*

## Teaching Philosophy

I view my mission as an academic scholar two-fold: uncovering new knowledge and passing knowledge on to students. The combination of research and teaching is the primary reason I am pursuing a career in academia. I truly enjoy teaching because it allows me to inspire students to learn about economics in the same way my teachers inspired me. I find that teaching also helps my own research. A teacher who can explain economic concepts to students is also more likely to be able to identify the essence of the economic forces in his or her research, and to convey that essence to an interested audience.

Since the Fall of 2016, the second year of my Ph.D. program, I have been a Teaching Assistant for Principles of Macroeconomics and Intermediate Macroeconomics, taught by Professors Eric McDermott and Ramses Armendariz. Each week, I led two to four discussion groups with up to 40 undergraduate students each. The goal of the discussion groups was to help students better understand the material taught in lectures. We conducted several practice exercises and my role was to walk students through those exercises, answer questions and compare solutions. Since Spring 2017, I have served as a head Teaching Assistant. In this role, I spent less time teaching in the classroom and was more involved in the organization of the course. For example, I was responsible for the exercises for the discussion sessions and contributed to the organization of the exams for up to 1,200 students. I have been honored by my students with being selected for the List of Teachers ranked as Excellent by their Students, with Outstanding Ratings every semester since Spring 2017 with an average overall teaching effectiveness of 4.8 on a 5-point scale. This list includes the teachers with an overall teaching effectiveness from the highest 10 percent of the entire university. In Spring 2019, I received the Robert E. Demarest Memorial Teaching Award from the Economics Department. Each year, this award goes to two teachings assistants out of 100 graduate students from the Economics Department and is based on students' evaluations and instructors' recommendations. Moreover, I have served as an Online Teaching Assistant for Principles of Macroeconomics during several summer and winter semesters. In Spring 2020, I helped successfully transition the Principles of Macroeconomics course with over 1,200 students from a face-to-face to an online course in the middle of the semester. My experience in prior semesters as both a traditional and online teaching assistant was key to the smooth transition of the course.

During the discussion sessions, I encourage collaboration among students. In any first class, I give students a few minutes to introduce themselves to each other. Students, especially Freshmen, come from many different backgrounds. Many have just arrived on campus and this short introduction helps to break the ice between students. In teaching, I find it helpful to let students work alone on the practice questions, but then, before I show the solutions, I ask students to compare their results among one another and to teach their approach to each other. I believe that this keeps students engaged and it is a great way for them to store information for a longer period. To help foster good group interactions, I always circulate to check for questions and encourage students to team up with others if they are working alone. I also encourage students to form study groups as it is a more efficient and more fun way to study for exams.

As an instructor, I believe strongly in the efficacy of project-based learning. For my ideal undergraduate classes, I prefer a paper rather than an exam as a final examination. I offer students a benchmark project whereas students can also choose a topic of their own interest. Then, the students would need to work on their project throughout the semester with multiple deadlines while I walk them through the process. For example, the students would need to develop a research question, identify data and analyze the chosen data using the methods learned in class. At the end of the semester, the students would need to present their work in front of the class in a short presentation and to submit a paper. The goal of the project is to learn how to apply the material learned in class using actual data and to get familiar with statistical software such as EViews or Gauss. Students who are more interested in the subject and/or in applying for Graduate School or Ph.D. programs can use the course to write a first research paper and use it in their applications.

I also want to engage students in the class because students who are engaged store information for a longer period and enjoy a better learning experience. For example, I would ask questions during the lecture that students need to discuss first in small groups before we discuss their answers together. Furthermore, it is important to show students that Economics is “everywhere” and that we are surrounded by Economics in our daily lives. A good way to promote this idea is to include reading assignments in the class from widely read newspapers, such as the New York Times or Washington Post, or more specialized magazines such as The Economist. Another interesting approach is to ask students to listen to Podcasts that introduce Economics to a broader audience such as Freakonomics. Once students understand that Economics is not just dry models but captures almost any aspect of our lives, I believe students become more interested and engaged, and more motivated to learn about Economics beyond the classroom.

## **Teaching interest**

I feel equally comfortable teaching macroeconomics at the introductory and intermediate level to undergraduate students and at the advanced level to graduate students. My ideal undergraduate course is aimed at junior or senior undergraduate students with an interest in macroeconomics. The course provides an overview of modern macroeconomic theory (Solow Model, Business Cycle model and New Keynesian model) and introduces students to the workhorse model in empirical macroeconomics: Vector Autoregression models. This object also requires an introduction to time series econometrics. Garin, Lester and Sims (2020) as well as Doepke, Lehnert and Sellgren (1999) offer excellent free online textbooks. Another goal of the course is to include homework assignments and a final paper with actual data that can be solved using Excel, EViews or Gauss.

The key question in the current environment is how to organize an online version of the course and how to transition fast to an online course if necessary. For classes which must be held remotely via zoom, I like to record asynchronous videos about the general concepts that students need to watch on their own in advance of class. I then use the actual lecture time for discussing practice questions or relating the concepts to currently relevant topics. Moreover, I have found the opportunity to work in small groups to be one of the most beneficial ways for student learning, both from verbalizing their thoughts and/or listening to the thoughts of others as well as giving me opportunities for more direct interaction. For cases where classes need to be online, I find breakout rooms to be essential in creating a similar environment. It is crucial that I replicate moving around to each group at some point during one of the breakout sessions to provide support and set the expectation of being on task. The other benefit is that it provides them a break and change of pace to re-focus. I also like to have students use the function that allows them to raise their hand when they are in the larger group just as in a face-to-face class. This allows students to formulate an answer in their mind and let me involve more students than if they just shout out their answer.

My ideal graduate course would combine my research interest of macroeconomics and Bayesian time series econometrics. This course would cover an introduction to Bayesian time series econometrics, the estimation of structural VAR (SVARs) models and different identification strategies. Luetkepohl and Killian (2018) is an excellent textbook that covers the material of this course very well. Students become familiar with SVARs and use them to analyze important economic problems, e.g., fiscal and monetary policy, oil price and uncertainty shocks. One of the key goals of the course would be to strengthen student’s coding skills, thereby helping them to conduct their own research projects for their Master or Ph.D. thesis. Therefore, homework assignments and take-home exams aim to replicate and to extend the main papers in the literature.

## **Teaching References**

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## Summary of Teaching Evaluations

- Spring 2020: Head Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Macroeconomics (Undergraduate), UIUC, Professor Ramses Armendariz Buaun, Evaluation: 4.2/5
- Fall 2019: Head Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Macroeconomics (Undergraduate), UIUC, Professor Eric McDermott, Evaluation: 4.8/5\*\*
- Spring 2019: Head Teaching Assistant, Intermediate Macroeconomics (Undergraduate), UIUC, Professor Eric McDermott, Evaluation: 4.9/5\*,\*\*
- Fall 2018: Head Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Macroeconomics (Undergraduate), UIUC, Professor Eric McDermott, Evaluation: 4.9/5\*\*
- Spring 2018: Head Teaching Assistant, Intermediate Macroeconomics (Undergraduate), UIUC, Professor Eric McDermott, Evaluation: 4.8/5\*\*
- Fall 2017: Head Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Macroeconomics (Undergraduate), UIUC, Professor Eric McDermott, Evaluation: 4.6/5\*\*
- Spring 2017: Head Teaching Assistant, Intermediate Macroeconomics (Undergraduate), UIUC, Professor Eric McDermott, Evaluation: 4.9/5\*\*
- Fall 2016: Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Macroeconomics (Undergraduate), UIUC, Professor Eric McDermott, Evaluation: 4.2/5

Note: Evaluation is based on a 5-point scale and represents my overall teaching effectiveness

\* In Spring 2019, I received the Robert E. Demarest Memorial Teaching Award from the Economics Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

\*\*Awarded in the “List of Teachers ranked as Excellent by their Students, with Outstanding Ratings”

## Selected Student Comments

- Sebastian has a great grasp of macroeconomics which really allows him to teach effectively. This was a great semester
- He knows what he is talking about and is passionate about it
- Great TA, have nothing bad to say. Could honestly be teaching this course
- I had a friend who came to this discussion instead of her own because the TA is so good.
- Seb is one of the best TAs I have seen. Always prepared and answered the questions promptly
- Best TA I had this semester. I have nothing bad to say
- He is very good at explaining things and patient when I didn't understand. I loved Sebastian
- TA was phenomenal, in some cases, more impactful than the Professor himself.
- Discussion section was great! Sebastian was a fantastic TA
- Best TA ever
- The instructor makes a great effort to make everyone understand and enjoy the course + he is always open to feedback even after class
- Sebastian, you did an amazing job breaking down tough topics in ways that are understandable. I always come from lecture very confused but leave discussion w/ a better grip on the material. Only problem is that you didn't get the 1 hour 30 minutes to teach us.
- Super prepared! Very clear Did not make you feel dumb for asking questions
- Loved Sebastian's ability to explain
- Took time to walk us through problems which was very helpful. Also made a good effort to engage the class
- Very knowledgeable, cares about his students
- Very good at explaining concepts
- He is perfect
- Best TA I've ever had!
- Sebastian is the G.O.A.T.