

## TEACHING STATEMENT

HENRIQUE VERAS DE PAIVA FONSECA

One of my goals as a scholar is to share my learning with others. I am passionate about teaching, and I truly believe that passion is the key characteristic that makes a great teacher. All of the teachers who have positively impacted me were avid enthusiasts of teaching. I try to bring that same passion to my teaching. My second objective as a scholar is to discover new knowledge. This objective is intrinsically connected with the first: teaching encourages the critical and precise thinking needed to convey abstract concepts. This constant process of learning and teaching is what drives me to pursue an academic career.

I initiated my teaching career at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) as a teaching assistant for the undergraduate-level Microeconomic Principles course during the Fall of 2013. The broad economic, social, and cultural diversity I found among the students has had a great impact on my views on the responsibilities and objectives of being a teacher. I soon realized that one important commitment of a teacher is not only to acknowledge but to embrace and encourage diversity in the University environment. My own personal experiences have also helped me to appreciate students aspirations and struggles in their academic progress; I was born in and have spent a large fraction of my life in a socially and culturally diverse country, Brazil. Below, I describe my teaching methodology, as well as a detailed information about how I approach teaching, which were shaped by these diverse environments.

In class, I introduce a new theory or idea by referring back to some fundamental economic concept. I start building up ideas from this basic and abstract definition to the most specific and concrete set of arguments that make up the theory, always asking the students the necessary questions that lead to the next step of the process. For example, in teaching the Solow Model – the workhorse model of the Neoclassical Theory of Economic Development – I start by asking students the simple question of what is a production function. This question invariably directs the students to evoke their prior knowledge acquired in introductory courses of microeconomic principles. Students are then able to develop the stream of thought based on this initial concept by incorporating the ideas that make up the building blocks of the theory, such as the aggregate production function, capital accumulation, etc. I find this approach to teaching effective and rewarding for multiple reasons. First, since my courses are usually frequented by students at various stages of their academic career – and as a result, with different background information – building up complex theories and economic models starting from some common knowledge principle provides the opportunity for the entire classroom to benefit equally from the lecture. I try my best to follow the adage “no student left behind.” Second, by facilitating the process of developing independent analytical thinking through this deductive approach, students themselves control how they connect the dots to reach the main conclusions. In this process, I seek to create an environment to foster

their creativity, independence and self-confidence in the process of grasping class material as well as conducting their research.

Students are evaluated according to their demonstrated ability to understand and precisely express complex and relevant concepts. Throughout the semester, students are asked to solve problem sets, which are designed to both reinforce class contents and expand their knowledge about them. Typically, students are asked to analyze real data in light of the theories discussed in class. In a profession in which data analysis is becoming increasingly important, developing such skills is paramount to preparing students for the professional challenges that lie ahead on their professional journey, regardless of whether their ambitions are to work in academia or in industry. Additionally, I introduce newspaper articles, videos, podcasts, and other media related to the topics in each problem set and students have the opportunity to analyze them. Exams are skewed towards evaluating students' ability to explain abstract concepts and theories in a precise and critical manner. A representative question would contain aspects of both mathematical solution of a given problem as well as extensions that involve alternative conclusions and counterfactual situations to challenge students' understanding of the assumptions and conclusions of the economic theories. I have also introduced polling tools as well as experiments and games, which have shown to be extremely useful for multiple purposes. First, breaking up long periods of material being covered improves students' attention, attendance, and engagement; second, they create a more inclusive classroom atmosphere by giving "voice" to students who might usually not feel comfortable answering questions in public; third, these tools create valuable spillovers that frequently benefit the entire class; finally, I am able to assess students' understanding of the material in a timely manner to fill some gaps in mastering concepts there might not be entirely understood.

The biggest challenge I face in teaching Economics is understanding the different levels of expectations by the diverse student body prior to the beginning of the course. Being able to meet these expectations, and being able to avoid frustration or loss of interest in the subject are challenges that require a great deal of daily effort, passion for the profession, and some creativity in the teaching process. The first few semesters of teaching both at UIUC and Oberlin proved to be extremely challenging in this respect. Fortunately, the experience acquired through time has helped me to create and maintain a channel of mutual respect and trust with the students, providing me useful knowledge about their most compelling needs and aspirations. Guidance and out-of-classroom support is paramount to nurturing this channel of trust and respect and I strive to make myself available, even outside pre-arranged office hours, to discuss their progress along the way and to provide clear and direct suggestions for directions of improvements in their academic progress.

#### ON-LINE TEACHING

Although my philosophy and approach to teaching are the same whether classes are in-person or on-line, there are some differences in the way classes are conducted that need to be addressed. First, as active learning is an important component of my teaching goals, the lack of in-person interactions connecting me to students as individuals needs to somehow

be compensated in an on-line class format. To keep students engaged and participative, I design most of my synchronous on-line classes with various supporting technology tools, including short video clips from movies, series and cartoons that are related to the topic being discussed, as well as polling tools, practical exercises, on-line experiments and games. In the case of asynchronous on-line classes, I envision including a good deal of references for further study and out-of-class interactions, such as discussion forums and other activities that facilitate students' connection among themselves and myself, including creation and sharing of media by the students and other group activities.

Accessibility is an important issue that arises with on-line teaching. In critical times, such as the current state of the world, on-line education can be a valuable resource in bringing knowledge to larger groups of students and shortening distances. However, it can also be a factor contributing to widening an already latent technology divide among students from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Different students face different challenges in taking on-line classes and it is the instructor's responsibility to acknowledge such differences and work towards facilitating accessibility from all students. To address these issues, I record all my synchronous on-line lectures and make them available on different platforms for students' access should they not be able to attend a live meeting. Additionally, I plan to make transcriptions of the lectures available so they have an additional resource in case issues of any sort preclude them from accessing the videos.

## TEACHING EVALUATIONS

Throughout my teaching experience, I have sought feedback from students. The many comments I have received from students and their overall evaluation scores reinforce my confidence about the effectiveness of my approach to teaching and give me directions to important ways in which I can keep improving on creating an inclusive and engaging environment to help flourish students' creativity, academic curiosity, and critical thinking.

Besides the institutional end-of-semester evaluations, I also frequently ask students for a mid-semester informal feedback to gain insight on how they feel about the course and their expectations for the remainder of the semester. I use the information obtained by their feedback to make any necessary modifications or adaptations. One example of a situation in which I benefited from early feedback and had the chance to address the issue in the course of the semester can be summarized by the following anonymous suggestion regarding things that might be approached differently on the course: "Looking at certain developing countries specifically who may be experiencing what we're learning about." Because of feedback such as this I was able to soon realize how important it is for the students' learning to always make the connection between the knowledge acquired in the classroom and real-life situations. In the lectures that followed, I have always tried to fit examples of developing countries struggles related to the topic in question. I am very pleased to see the improvement on the overall satisfaction of the students with my teaching. It convinces me that the steps I have been taking to improve myself as a teacher have been reverberating among them.

Below are the evaluation scores from the courses that I have taught both at the University of Illinois and Oberlin College.

TABLE 1. Summary of Course Evaluations – UIUC

Term	Course	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.
Spring 2019**	Development Economics	4.8	5.0	5.0	0.4
Fall 2018**	Development Economics	4.8	5.0	5.0	0.5
Spring 2018	Economics Statistics I (TA)	3.7	4.0	5.0	1.1
Fall 2017*	Economics Statistics I (TA)	4.6	5.0	5.0	0.5
Summer 2017**	Development Economics	5.0	5.0	5.0	0.0
Spring 2017*	Development Economics	4.4	5.0	5.0	0.8
Fall 2016	Development Economics	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.9
Summer 2016	Economics Statistics II	4.2	5.0	5.0	1.0
Spring 2016	Development Economics	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.6
Fall 2015	Development Economics	3.4	4.0	4.0	1.1
Summer 2015	Economics Statistics II	4.2	4.0	5.0	0.7
Spring 2015*	Intermediate Macroeconomics (Head TA)	4.2	4.0	4.0	0.6
Fall 2014	Economics Statistics I (TA)	4.0	4.0	5.0	1.0
Summer 2014	Economics Statistics II	3.9	4.0	4.0	1.0
Spring 2014*	Macroeconomic Principles (TA)	4.2	4.0	4.0	0.8
Fall 2013	Microeconomic Principles (TA)	4.4	4.5	5.0	0.7

The numbers represent the average students' response to the statement: "Rate the instructor's overall teaching effectiveness".

Numbers range from 1, which stands for exceptionally low, to 5, which denotes exceptionally high.

\* Rated as "Excellent" on the Instructor and Course Evaluation (ICES) questionnaire forms (UIUC).

\*\* Rated as "Outstanding" (Top 10%) on ICES forms (UIUC).

TABLE 2. Summary of Course Evaluations for Oberlin College

Term	Course	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.
Spring 2020	Principles of Economics	3.8	4.0	4.0	1.1
Spring 2020*	Seminars on Comparative Development	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.0
Fall 2019	Economic Development	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.8
Fall 2019	Principles of Economics	3.3	3.0	3.0	1.1

The numbers represent the average students' response to the statement: "Overall rating of the instructor". Numbers range from 1, which stands for very poor, to 5, which denotes excellent.

\* Scores based on only two evaluations.

#### STUDENTS' ANONYMOUS END-OF-SEMESTER COMMENTS

Below I list a sample of representative comments from end-of-semester evaluations:

"Always eager to answer questions and never made students feel bad about asking questions."

"He is very clear on the subject and tries to make it as simple as possible to explain a complex topic."

"He was very good at teaching and answering questions. Helped me realize what I want to study."

"I found the course enlightening and it brought new ideas to my mind that I had no previously considered."

"I really appreciate how Professor Veras steps aside and allows the class to discuss topics we're interested in from time to time, but he also keeps us on track when we need to be."