

Teaching Statement

Zhifeng Cai

Department of Economics, University of Minnesota

Teaching Philosophy

In China, there is an old saying: “It is better to teach people how to fish than just give them fish”. During my experience as a teacher for both graduate and undergraduate courses, I find it even more important to trigger people’s interest in the subject. To do so, it is not enough to just give students’ knowledge. It is also important to let them understand the usefulness of it while at the same time appreciate the beauty of it. This is my teaching philosophy: I want my students to realize that the subject of Economics is *both useful and beautiful*. Considering the differences in audiences, I employ different strategies when designing graduate and undergraduate courses.

When I worked as a teaching assistant for the graduate sequence of Macroeconomics, I realize that it must be hard for the students to grasp materials with such mathematical deepness within such a short period of time. Therefore during classes, I went through the material slowly and patiently. More importantly, when I was going through the algebra I also help students at a *conceptual* level, bringing simple example to help them grasp the concepts. For instance, I find it very helpful to give examples with only two periods to give intuitions for infinite-period models.

I also worked as an instructor and teaching assistant for various undergraduate courses. At the undergraduate level, I tried to convey the concepts without using equations. To do so, I employed different methods. For example, I let student present recent news about Macroeconomics as well as their own interpretations. Whenever possible, student will work with real world data instead of textbook examples. I also encourage student to engage in debates to express their own opinions about economics policies. I maintain a relaxed atmosphere so that students’ interest in economics can be triggered.

Teaching Evaluation

At the end of each course, the Economics Department asks student to fill in a standard sheet about my performance. Below, I provide a summary of their responses.

Undergraduate and Graduate Courses (6 pooled)

Fall 2012 - Present

<i>Statement</i>	<i>% Agree or Strongly agree</i>
<i>The instructor was well-prepared for class</i>	96%
<i>The instructor presented the subject matter clearly</i>	95%
<i>The instructor provided feedback intended to improve my course performance</i>	90%
<i>The instructor treated me with respect</i>	99%
<i>I have a deeper understanding of the subject matter as a result of the course</i>	95%
<i>My interest in the subject was stimulated</i>	92%

Selected Student Feedback

Undergraduate students:

“For all of the examples we did in class, we sent through each one slowly, which helped me understand the material more.”

“He explained very well and answered our questions very kindly”

“Lots of presentation, so we do lots of research. Really good”

“He is willing to listen to my words and given a good response to that”

“He is perfect”

Graduate students

“Great lectures. Interesting way of explaining things.”

“Zhifeng did very well, not letting the language barrier get in the way. He was an excellent teaching assistant who was helpful outside of class as well.”

“Give clear explanations and his availability. Thanks!”

“Very clear, easily approachable, always helpful.”

“Went over difficult concepts.”