

Aparna Howlader - Teaching Statement

I first worked as a Teaching Assistant during my graduate studies at Simon Fraser University. In eight years of graduate school, I was fortunate to gain experience over many semesters teaching a range of courses including intermediate microeconomics, labor economics, the economics of crime, and principles of microeconomics. Through these experiences, I have developed personal teaching strategies, and I work to improve deepen my teaching methods each semester.

Philosophy

As a teacher of undergraduate classes and as a mentor to many graduate and undergraduate students, I believe that my main responsibilities are to inspire and foster students' curiosity and passion for learning, ensure equal access to available resources and information, and help students to grow and develop their grit. I continuously develop, practice, and design my teaching methods to achieve this goal.

In-Class Method

Designing a class to achieve my goals requires determination and continuous effort as well as a scientific understanding of teaching. I am thankful for my won mentors and professors at the University of Illinois, who provided me opportunities to think independently and to implement new methods in my classroom.

- Classroom participation and activities

The class I primarily taught at the University of Illinois is a freshman year course, "Principles of Microeconomics." This is the largest class in the department, and we have the most diverse population. When I started to teach the course in 2014, it was lecture based and not a discussion-based tutorial class. I requested and implemented a more discussion- based and participation-dependent class system. In 2015, we changed the system at different stages to take into account and incorporate students' needs. The group discussions remain popular, and TAs for that class continue to follow the methods and structure I designed.

- Cumulative thinking about class

Sometimes in the rush of the semester, we forget the big picture. In my TA sessions, I ask my students to write a one-page essay at the end of the class to show what they have learned and what they think can be improved weekly. I understand that sometimes we overload our students with course material. To put learning in perspective, I compare production theory with consumer theory, individual agents with game theories, etc. throughout the semester. This comparison, along with students' weekly evaluations, keeps the course process on track and provides perspective.

- Finding interesting examples

To ensure that students learn and find interest in economics, I work to generate lots of new examples relevant to the students' lives. This was initially hard for me, as I did not grow up in the same culture as many of my students; but over

time, I understood how parents teach, the dorm lifestyle, and other university activities. For example, the pricing of food in the dorms became a fun example of price discrimination.

- Practice Exams and Weekly Materials

I provide students with practice exams and assignments because it is only by practicing that they will learn what interests them, what material gives them difficulty, and how to cultivate a better understanding of economics.

- Non-textbook material and research articles

Non-textbook economics material including Freakonomics or “A Beautiful Mind” served to inspire me as a student when I was growing up. I learned, imagined, and aspired to be a real-world policy economist as a result, and I tried to communicate these ideas to my students too. For example, I suggested they watch “A Beautiful Mind” in game theory classes, and students seemed to respond positively to these references. Students continue to use these references in the concepts of their writing assignments too.

I worked as a TA for the Economics of Crime with Professor Stephen Easton, which was a writing-based class. For writing classes, apart from focusing on the writing quality, I try to generate discussions about how creative answers can be developed through reading and learning practices. I share my own experiences of learning how to write.

- One-to-one Office Hours

I depend on one-to-one office hours to learn about students. I also prefer one-to-one meetings so that students feel comfortable. I realize that students often find it easier to share their struggles when they meet with me. I started to do this at UIUC, and I continue to do it in my current lab to help junior colleagues. I encourage them to tell me their actual struggles and necessities, which in return helps me to rethink the class material and mentoring methods.

Mentoring and Advising

I am excited and motivated by sharing knowledge and experience. This interest leads me to mentor junior graduate students. Informally, I mentored many junior graduate students in my graduate school, and I am now helping Matt Desmond to mentor some of my junior lab colleagues on their own research projects.

- Mutual respectful relationship

I look forward to creating mutually respectful relationships with my mentees and advisees to maintain healthy academic and personal relationships. I set boundaries, and I make sure that they are the same for all students. I like to demonstrate the path and to work with their diverse backgrounds to understand them better.

- Help to cultivate and map research

My role as a mentor is to cultivate students’ own research agendas and let them grow. I read their drafts and give them feedback, but I do not want to dictate to them, nor do I want them to do what I do.

- Toward independence and self-esteem

From my own PhD experience, I know that the most important aspect is to own the decisions you make as a researcher. I aim to encourage my mentees toward independence and self-esteem so that they also feel confident in the long run.

Teaching Related Service

Given that Illinois is a very diverse community, and we had students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, I worked to be extra careful in processing information. I came from a non-native English speaker background from a developing country. I know the importance of access to information if a student is from a different background, and as a teacher and mentor, I take that as my responsibility too. I maintain a personal academic blog, and I am a contributor to different public platforms that share information on higher studies with the next generation. I was affiliated with the I-Promise Mentoring program at UIUC, aiming to understand the needs of people of diverse backgrounds. I also try to help students develop networks with my friends of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds to find role models.

Additionally, I organized multiple conferences and student seminars to stimulate the knowledge-generating process inside the department. I am now part of the leadership of the AAEA Committee on Women in Agricultural Economics as a secretary and treasurer. In this role, I work to enhance the experience of minorities and women in agricultural economics. I have also helped Alex Winter-Nelson at UIUC to develop online classes, and I appreciate digital platforms that can generate a more equitable education system.

Conclusion

I conclude with a personal story. I was “supposed” to major in Mass Communication and Journalism in my undergrad course of study. Due to circumstances somewhat beyond my control, I had to transfer to economics. I had no real interest in doing so at first. Still, two professors in my undergrad university, S. M. Ashiquzzaman and M. M. Akash, sparked a passion for learning economics, asking relevant questions, and using economic tools to answer them. I think teaching should be like that: engaging, passionate, and helping to raise questions. This is what I have been trying to implement in my classes. I did not find learning easy in my early days, and I try to draw on my own experience as a student to be empathetic toward current students. I enjoyed teaching upper-level undergrad courses, but entry and introductory level course design are key to the success of the programs. These classes can change the mindset of students and show them how to think about the real world.

Some students are shy, some are introverts, and some are extroverts. My goal as a teacher and mentor is to be approachable and available for every student. Teaching is its own learning process, and I remain dedicated to learn and grow in this regard.