



STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

In teaching any economics class the goal ought to be to encourage and improve critical thinking on the part of the student. In my own teaching, I attempt to achieve this end through the following

1. encourage comfort with quantitative methods and general numerical literacy;
2. illustrate the power and—in many cases just as importantly—the *limits* of formal models for understanding the world; and,
3. develop the skills necessary to apply and, where necessary, create models whether it be in a formal career setting, or an informal setting such as understanding the news.

To that end I intend to achieve these goals through a combination of rigorous specification of quantitative models, detailed discussion of the assumptions being made, and application of these models to the real world.

My teaching philosophy is informed by two experiences: an undergraduate education at a small liberal arts college of fewer than 900 students, and ten semesters as a TA mostly for principles of economics at a large university where, in a typical fall semester, well over 1000 students take Econ 101.

When I first arrived at UW–Madison, I was amazed by the breadth of topics covered in principles. For example, I did not see a Hicksian decomposition of substitution effects until well into an intermediate class as an undergrad. At the time, I thought this reflected poorly on the quality of the economics program at my undergraduate institution, but in my interactions with students, the more I realized that this breadth was more a consequence of the respective comparative advantages of the two systems.

For example, although the professors always devote a fair amount of lecture time to discussion of applications of the models presented in class, it's impossible to have a true conversation with 400 students. Further, the logistics of evaluating so many students lead exams to be mostly multiple choice and perhaps a bit of short answer.

Taken together, these result in more focus on the presentation of quantitative models and numerical computation. Given the skill and talent of the professors—and, I like to think, the TAs—the introductory courses at UW seem to me to successfully improve quantitative reasoning of students, but perhaps fall short at encouraging the integration of these skills with broader qualitative reasoning skills. Nonetheless, teaching in such an environment has allowed me to develop the important skill of teaching quantitative methods, especially to students who initially lack confidence with mathematical methods.

By contrast, although in my own undergraduate principles course we covered fewer topics, the ones we did cover were supplemented by in class discussion of how the models could be applied to policy evaluation. At every stage, these ideas were reinforced through assignments with both the usual sort of numerical computations, but also writing assignments that forced integration of the quantitative models into a broader argument. Put together, this encouraged students to be active participants in

the learning process and ultimately develop a deeper understanding.

As an instructor, I intend to use what I've learned in these settings to achieve the goals I've laid out. More concretely, in a principles course I plan to apply these principles to the topics covered in the standard texts such as Samuelson, Mankiw, or Krugman/Wells, but spend more time discussing the underlying assumptions and policy implications of the models explored by these texts. For example, covering the mathematical definition and computation of surplus, would naturally be followed by whether and under what circumstances simply summing valuations across different individuals is a sensible or useful procedure.

To maintain interest and encourage curiosity, I will link at every stage the abstract models with real world applications. For example, externalities might be illustrated through the usual applications like air pollution, but also more micro-level environments such a noise in dormitories. Throughout, these ideas will be solidified through a combination of the usual sort of numerical exercises and open-ended writing assignments that encourage synthesis of both quantitative and language skills.

In a higher level class, I would transition towards encouraging students to develop their own models. To that end, I appreciate the approach Becker takes in his *Economic Theory* text of presenting a few models to illustrate some basic ideas, and then following it up with deceptively simple exercises. For example, following the chapter on competition and monopoly, Becker presents the following exercise:

Evaluate: If effective rent control were imposed on all houses built before 1960, the demand for houses built after 1960 would be reduced.

To fully answer this requires consideration of details such as the interaction of demands for housing of different ages, relative supply elasticities, by what mechanism any rent-control-induced shortages are resolved, and confounding factors such as an illicit sublease market.

To be sure, many of Becker's exercises, including the one above, would greatly benefit from a bit more guidance, and in general the text is a bit dated. Nonetheless, although I don't believe Becker's text is appropriate for a modern economics class, I feel the general approach of studying simple, but open-ended scenarios like this is an especially effective one for developing the reasoning skills on many dimensions—both quantitative and qualitative. As an instructor, I look forward to updating this approach for a more modern setting.

Ultimately, I believe these techniques ought to encourage the critical thinking skills that a liberal arts education ought to. But to be sure, I've learned a lot about teaching over the past few years from my supervisors, colleagues, and students—and I hope my students have learned a bit from me as well—and could always learn more. I welcome any opportunity to further improve these practices.



DIVERSITY STATEMENT

As an individual, I strongly believe that we should all strive towards creating an equitable and inclusive environment for everyone around us *for its own sake*. As a researcher and a teacher, I feel the duty to build an inclusive community is only magnified: as a researcher, I feel we all benefit from research on a diversity of fields with a diversity of methods from a diversity of perspectives. As a teacher, with a strong belief that economic methods provide a powerful tool for understanding the world, when appropriately applied as part of a broader intellectual toolkit, I want to ensure that as many students have the opportunity to experience the same excitement that I did as an undergrad first learning these tools, and that no one ever feels that economics “is not for them.”

Nonetheless, it’s one thing to pay lip service to these ideals, and another to actively work towards making them a reality. Briefly, I’ll focus on a few ways in which I try to incorporate these ideals into my own interactions with students.

In a lecture setting, I try to use a diverse set of examples in order to emphasize the relevance of economic ideas in contexts relatable to students’ everyday lives and interests. This includes the usual examples like pollution and climate change on topics such as externalities and public goods, but also examples such as using some of the tools from producer theory to understand labor allocation in non-remunerated settings such as home production and use that as the starting point for discussion of labor policies such as parental leave. Furthermore, I feel it’s important that students have some role-models that demonstrate that economics is not just a field of white men. Of course, as a white man, I can’t personally fill that role, but I can ensure that the researchers I refer to are as diverse as the research itself.

When working with students individually, I try to be as open and encouraging to my students as possible. Part of my role as a mentor is to help guide students through academia, a possibly unfamiliar environment for many college students but especially first-generation college students. As an instructor, that can be something as small as meeting with students individually at the start of the semester to ensure that my expectations of them and their expectations of me are clear and that they feel comfortable speaking with me, or it can be something up to directly encouraging an individual student to apply for opportunities that they might not have otherwise known about or felt qualified for and assisting them where appropriate.

There’s no doubt that I have and likely will fall short of these ideals at times, but as with teaching more broadly, creating an equitable environment for my students and colleagues is a lifelong learning project.



DOCUMENTATION OF TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

I served as a teaching assistant for ten semesters, from fall semester 2014 through spring semester 2019, with experience teaching Econ 101 (Introductory Microeconomics), Econ 711/713 (PhD-level Economic Theory), and Econ 102 (Introductory Macroeconomics).

For the first eight semesters, I worked in the Department of Economics, where typical TA duties consist of holding weekly 50 minute discussion sections for students, holding regular office hours, and writing questions for homework assignments and exams. During the final two semesters, I worked as a TA in the Business Learning Center (BLC), which provides optional extra help for students, holding twice-weekly hour-long help sessions and office hours.

In three semesters I served as a head TA for large introductory lectures (between 250 and 400 students), where I had additional responsibilities such as working with the course instructor to put together exams, ensuring exams were printed on time in sufficient quantities, and managing the course grade records.

The following pages of this document include the following:

1. Summary of my most recent teaching evaluations,
2. Selected student comments from those evaluations, and
3. The most recent evaluation by my supervising professor.

Complete teaching evaluations going back to fall 2014 are available upon request.

SUMMARY OF RECENT EVALUATIONS

The Department of Economics conducts evaluations of all TAs every semester consisting of a standard student evaluation and a qualitative evaluation by the course instructor. Below I've highlighted the responses to the five substantive questions on the student evaluations:

- “How would you rate the TA’s ability to lead discussion or present material in your section?”
(1 - “Poor” to 5 - “Excellent”)
- “Of those sections, what proportion were interesting and/or thought-provoking?”
(1 - “Almost none” to 5 - “Almost all”)
- “Overall, what is your assessment of the TA’s knowledge of the material related to this course?”
(1 - “Poor” to 5 - “Excellent”)
- “How responsive and helpful did you find your TA during office hours?”
(1 - “Not at all helpful” to 5 - “Extremely helpful”)
- “Given the professor’s role and the structure of this course, how would you evaluate your TA’s performance?”
(1 - “Poor” to 5 - “Excellent”)

	Econ 713 (PhD Level) Spring 2017		Econ 101 (Head TA) Fall 2017		Econ 101 (Head TA) Spring 2018	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Ability to lead discussion	4.36	5	4.22	4	4.35	5
Sections interesting	4.29	4	3.74	4	3.83	4
Knowledge of material	4.59	5	4.85	5	4.91	5
Office hours helpful	4.45	5	4.32	5	4.07	4.5
Overall Rating*	4.59	5	4.52	5	4.52	5
*Department averages for these three semesters were 4.14, 4.11, and 4.12 respectively.						

In each of these semesters, I received at most 2 (out of around 25 responses) student evaluations with an overall rating below 4 (1 student in each of fall and spring 2017, and 2 students in spring 2018).

In my final two semesters as a TA (working in the BLC), I did not receive the usual TA evaluation. The BLC conducted an evaluation for Fall 2018, but there was no bottom-line overall rating question, though the evaluation did include some useful student comments. The student survey was also conducted two months after the end of the semester and thus had very few responses. For reasons unknown to me, the BLC did not conduct an evaluation for me for Spring 2019. However, given that BLC sections are completely optional and are completely independent of the main course (and thus have no direct effect on grades), I take it as a relatively positive evaluation that my sections were regularly near capacity that semester.

SELECTED STUDENT COMMENTS

Below are some selected student comments from the last four semesters for which I received an evaluation (no evaluation was received for my final semester working for the BLC).

(Comments reported exactly as written)

Fall 2018 - BLC Econ 101

"I only want to thank a lot to Gary Baker. I attended all his sessions and it helped a lot. I would say that it was because of him that i really learned econ. I started attending his sessions after the first midterm (in which i got a B). After that, i never missed one of his sessions. He cared a lot about the students and never mind going at a slow pace so we can really learn the materias. The next two midterms i had, i got an A in both. I am completely sure it was because Gary helped me understand the logic behind econ. I am really thankful to him and this is the least i can do to show my gratefulness. Thank you Gary, you are the best!"

"As Econ 101 is a class that requires a lot of out of class practice, the BLC was a great was to test your knowledge with practice problems, in an environment that allowed you to ask questions."

Spring 2018 - Econ 101 (Head TA)

"did a good job picking out topics to go over and create problems that are more challenging. It was helpful to work through these examples together as a class to get further understanding. Sending out the answer key to the worksheet handed out in class was also very helpful if we didn't get to all the problems during the section. Teaching style was good and overall a funny guy, I think he was clearly the best TA for the class."

"Overall, it is evident that Gary cares about this course and the students who enroll in it. I appreciate that he is open to criticisms about the exams so that he and the rest of the TAs and Prof. Kelly can make adjustments accordingly. Also, he is able to explain economic concepts more in depth during the discussions which helps me learn the material a lot more."

Fall 2017 - Econ 101 (Head TA)

"Gary Baker is an excellent TA and always gave real life examples of economic situations where certain concepts would be used; something not done very often in lecture. My discussion section for the Econ 101 class was something I looked forward to all week."

"Walked us through specific examples of concepts very effectively. I almost always left discussion feeling like I understood the concept he was focusing on better than I did after a lecture. This man could easily be teaching the course"

Spring 2018 - Econ 713 (PhD-level)

"Gary, first of all thank you sooooo much for your help. Without your generous office hour, I may have failed the course already. I really enjoy your thorough explanations. When I ask you a questions, you would explain it from the beginning to the end, which often help me to realize some other important questions I didn't notice. It helps most of the time."

"Gary is amazing! He presents examples in sections and office hours in a step by step way that allows you to understand the broader theory. His manner is always incredibly helpful; he's not condescending if you don't understand. 711/713 would have been much harder without him!"



April 27, 2018

To the TA Evaluation Committee:

Gary Baker is currently serving as a Head TA in my Economics 101: Introduction to Microeconomics class. This is the fifth semester that I have worked with Gary and the third semester in which he has worked as a Head TA. It continues to be fun to watch his growth and development over the course of his years in graduate school. Gary is far more confident and at ease than he was during his first semester as a TA; he is doing a great job as a Head TA and appears from my perspective to enjoy having the additional responsibilities that come with that position. Gary is careful in his work, eager to perform at a high standard, always respectful and interested in making sure that his work and efforts satisfy my standards, and always reliable. It has been a pleasure to see Gary's growing confidence and maturity across the years I have worked with him.

This week when I visited his classroom I found Gary to be very well prepared. He had an outline on the board of the day's topics and he had a handout with questions for the class. The section was well attended and students were willing to participate and comfortable interacting with Gary. Gary speaks fluently; his expression and grammar are impeccable. He is clear, logical, and easy to follow; his explanations and examples help to clarify challenging material. Gary maintains excellent eye contact; he has a strong, clear voice; and projects a confidence and ease when presenting material. His blackboard skills were excellent as well: his graphs were large and clearly labeled, his handwriting easy to read, and his use of board space was paced and well organized. His comfort before his class continues to grow: his confidence and competence is very evident and very reassuring. He clearly enjoys teaching and striving to communicate clearly and effectively to his students. He understands the material and wants to make sure that he expands his students' understanding and engagement with the material. He just continues to grow and mature into his role as teacher: it is impressive. I am very pleased with his progress as an instructor across the years. Gary's presentation was strong with regard to his expression, his eye contact, and his organization. I was very impressed with the strength of his intuitive explanations: they are much clearer and better expressed than they were when he first started teaching. His body language suggests that he finds the classroom a comfortable place and an enjoyable place to be. He is an excellent instructor.

Gary's written work is also done at a very high level of competency as well as creativity. He is a careful editor and proofreader and for that I am very grateful. Gary is quick to volunteer to help out and is a strong team player. Gary writes questions and problems that are that rare combination of clear, challenging, and insightful: it is a delight to have him support my course. I continue to be impressed with his ability to draft questions that get at the heart of a concept but are expressed without an alliance on math skills. Each of the exams this semester has combined a rare combination of challenge and insight that I really appreciate. A student executing the answer through what they have learned in the classroom feels a delight that they have done this! And, I think, often find that the question and the work to answer it have helped them identify and strengthen a key concept presented in the class. It has been a pleasure working with Gary this semester and I highly recommend his work to you. If I can be of further assistance to you in evaluating his work please let me know.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Sawyer Kelly
Faculty Associate