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# Teaching Philosophy

Rodrigo Aranda

My first teaching experience was challenging. When I was a college student in Mexico, I took a class titled “Poverty, Inequality and Development”, where I learned how to do poverty measures for Mexico. This knowledge gave me the opportunity to work in Mexico’s government doing official measures of poverty and inequality while I was still in college. A few months after I started working, the instructor that taught this class invited me to teach my peer students how to measure poverty in Mexico using Stata Software. At first, I declined the invitation, I was too nervous to teach people of my same age and was not overly interested in teaching. I then spoke with my mother who is an anthropology teacher, she explained that it is something I should try. She told me not to be nervous because if I was invited to teach, it was because I had important knowledge to share, so in the end, I did teach the class. The moment I started teaching, I forgot I was nervous and instead felt an adrenaline rush followed by a sense of accomplishment from the experience. It was a challenging experience because I had no idea how important it was to get students engaged, the class almost ended up being a monologue from my part. What made the difference for me was not that I felt good teaching for the first time, but the fact that my students left the classroom knowing something they did not know before they entered it. From that challenging but rewarding experience, I have not stopped teaching. In the past ten years I have been a teacher assistant, invited lecturer, substitute teacher, tutor and instructor. I have taken every opportunity within my reach to teach.

As an economist, I view teaching as a process that has multiple iterations. With this in mind, I plan every new course taking into account how effective were my teaching skills, tests, assignments and activities on learning outcomes. Personal experience from previous teaching experiences as well as student evaluations are paramount. Teaching is an experience that can lead to long-lasting outcomes for students and that can create durable social impacts. My teaching philosophy has been greatly shaped by the professors I had during my college years, during my Ph.D. as well as student and individual critique from past teaching experiences. Whether it is an introductory or an upper-level course, the main focus is to equip students with the tools necessary to understand economic concepts and be able to think critically using these knowledge in their academic and future professional life. My teaching philosophy encompasses four basic concepts: inclusion, communication, analytical thinking, and consistency.

First, I always make a priority to teach in a way that prioritizes that every student is part of the learning process. I do so by creating an environment of inclusion in which every student has an opportunity to ask any question inside or outside class, students have to feel comfortable and in a

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learning environment. As an economist, I always place incentives for students that are performing poorly being careful not to create disenfranchisement from the better performing students. It has always been crucial for me to acknowledge that motivated students are as important as students that are struggling. An example of a policy I have implemented in the classroom to address this is the use of clicker technology so that every student can participate along with constant communication with students during class and office hours. Inclusion is relevant to keep students motivated. I always make my priority to make sure all students are motivated to learn, that they know the relevance of what they are learning and why they should learn it. I am passionate about economics, but that does not mean students will also be. Taking that into account, I try to match as much as I can what I teach to their learning objectives.

Second, students need to know clearly what to expect in terms of the knowledge they will acquire, what will be expected from them, how they will be evaluated, and what gains they are going to have by taking my course. Learning economics is not necessarily an easy thing. It is very important to clearly communicate economic concepts. In class, I always tell students that they already know economics, they practice most concepts in their real lives every single day, what they have to learn is the language and intuition of economics. To do so, I always use real life examples that are relatable to students experience and way of thinking. I always try to explain the same topic in multiple ways to make sure that every student has understood.

Economics as a social science encourages critical thinking. Learning economics is not only about learning concepts and definitions. As a teacher, it involves helping students develop an economic intuition that will invigorate them to analyze the real world under a different perspective. I set exercises in class that encourage students to think beyond the definition of what was just taught. With that same purpose, I always encourage students to discuss the concepts among themselves and to work as a group to find common answers to questions asked in class.

Finally, to enhance the learning process for students I try to be as consistent as possible with every element from the course. Assignments, tests, the level of instruction and grading have to all be in the same line. This optimizes the learning outcomes and gives students certainty during the semester.

Teaching is an experience that changes every semester, and because of that, I always try to gain knowledge from my mistakes and learn from faculty that has way more experience than I do in order to maximize student outcomes. If a student is motivated, knows what to expect from the class, feels included in the learning process and is encouraged to think critically beyond the concepts taught in class, that student will have the best learning outcomes. My ultimate goal from teaching students is for them to gain knowledge that is beyond economic concepts and definitions and be able to use that in their professional or academic lives.

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# Contributions to Diversity

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Lack of exposure to diversity is an issue in the world today. We live in a complexly interconnected world that is continually evolving. For this reason, the education process for new generations has to highlight the exposure to different contexts, ways of thinking and be a safe and inclusive environment that encourages students to think globally. Given these concepts, my contributions to diversity are the following:

First, an inclusive environment is a learning environment. Students from all national, ethnic origins, religions and preferences need to have equal opportunities to participate and be part of the group learning process.

Second, it is important to encourage students to think globally. In the field of economics most textbooks examples are in the context of the United States, I always try to give students examples from different parts of the world and enhance a global view in the analysis of economic concepts and issues.

Finally, being an international student from Mexico studying in the United States for the past five years, I have been part of this country's diverse population. My teaching and research have been shaped by my academic and personal exposure to different cultures and ways of seeing the world. Therefore, diversity is at the core of my academic life. Hence, I am certain that the my background and respect for a diverse environment will contribute greatly to the academic environment.

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# Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness

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This document shows the summary statistics and selected student comments from the Introduction to Microeconomics (ECON 1010) course that I taught at Tulane University in Spring 2017. For this course, I was responsible for the design and implementation of the course. Table 1 presents summary statistics of the student responses to teaching evaluations for this class and the departmental average<sup>1</sup>.

## 1. Summary Statistics

**Table 1:** Rating of the Instructor and the Course Material for the Introduction to Microeconomics

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Question	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median	Departmental average
Have you gained a good understanding of this subject matter?	4.3	0.8	4	4.2
Is the instructor fair in grading you?	4.6	0.7	5	4.4
Are the topics in the course organized in a coherent manner?	4.7	0.6	5	4.5
Is the instructor available at office hours or by appointment for help or discussion?	4.8	0.5	5	4.6
Does the instructor treat all students with respect?	4.9	0.5	5	4.8
Overall, how would you rate this course?	4.3	0.8	5	4.1
Overall, how would you rate this instructor?	4.4	0.7	5	4.3

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Course was taught in Spring 2017 to 58 students, 29 students completed the evaluation. Departmental average shows the mean of ECON 1010 courses taught at Tulane University.

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<sup>1</sup>Copies of the full set of evaluations, including comments, syllabus, midterms and final exam are available upon request: raranda@tulane.edu

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## 2. Selected Comments from Students

- “I was absolutely terrified to take microeconomics this semester but because of Professor Aranda and his teaching method, it is by far my best class. He is very clear when he explains complicated topics and explains everything multiple ways to make sure everyone understands”
- “He is very helpful and understanding. He made the concepts easy to understand and provide us with all the tools necessary to do well in this course. Amazing teacher!”
- “Rodrigo has a strong understanding of the material and explained it in a clear manner!”
- “Organization, friendliness, willingness to help you outside the classroom. I never felt afraid to ask a question or approach him after class”
- “The extra practice our instructor gives us is extremely helpful. The tests are an accurate representation of the material learned in class.”
- “Prof. Aranda truly cared about his students and wants them to succeed.”
- “Prof. Balcazar is very nice and knowledgeable, but unless Econ is your thing, the homework is so hard”
- “I think more class participation or just asking more questions to the class (aside from the clicker ones) would be helpful for this course and keep engagement up”
- “The class was completely lecture and it was very difficult to pay attention”

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### 3. Lessons Learned from Student Evaluations

For my first class instructor at Tulane I received both good and bad reviews. I see these comments as an opportunity to improve my teaching skills but most of all, as an opportunity to better student experiences and learning outcomes. I will change the way I do assignments. Sometimes it is too easy to use the textbook on-line resources for assignments but in many cases, the level of difficulty or the way questions are asked are not in line with what I expect the learning outcomes to be. The best solution for this is to manually make the assignments based on what is being taught in class and the concepts that need to be reinforced.

As for the comments that mention that there was too much lecture, I plan to use more innovative classroom activities. For example, since students are expected to read before class, I plan to design activities in which students work in groups to solve questions related to what was read. I also plan to have students participate more, not only using clicker questions, but asking students to be more directly participant during class. Another element to work on this issue has to do with the Syllabus. I planned my Syllabus thinking I would be able to cover an extensive number of topics, being behind on the planned schedule made me rush during class and have to lecture more. It is better to focus in less topics and make sure they are well understood by students rather than trying to teach many topics at a more superficial level.