Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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The hallmarks of my teaching philosophy are to promote student engagement in class, accommodate diverse backgrounds, and help students see how economics is present in their daily lives. These core principles shaped my Principles of Microeconomics course, taught during the summer of 2015 as part of the Summer Graduate Teaching Scholars (SGTS) program at UCSD. Peer instruction with clickers played a central role in my class because I believe it helped achieve all three primary goals.

To encourage student engagement and promote diversity in my classroom, I used peer instruction with clickers, which entails students voting on a multiple choice question, letting them discuss with their neighbors, and then voting again. To see how peer instruction with clickers worked in my class, see this video also posted on the teaching section of my website. The discussions that students have with their neighbors are great practice for a student who grasps a concept – if you can explain a concept to a fellow student, then you definitely have a deep understanding of it. These discussions are also great for the student who is still learning because she may hear yet another approach to understanding, one that relies on her’s and her neighbor’s unique experiences and viewpoints. Given the diverse backgrounds and experiences each student brings to the classroom, the opportunity to learn from peers, in addition to me, is invaluable. At a place like UCSD where English is a second language for many students, being able to practice talking about economics is very important to student achievement.

My students agreed about the value of clickers. In addition to the standard UCSD evaluations, attached at the end of this document, I asked students to fill out a survey that focused on my use of peer instruction. Ninety-eight percent of students agreed with the statement that “Discussing course topics with my seatmates in class helped me better understand the course material”. My students also provided many thoughtful comments, saying things like,

“Talking to a peer after the initial clicker question is immensely helpful. Even if neither me nor my partner know the answer, talking through the question often helps me reach the correct answer. I also enjoyed the feeling of explaining the answer to people if they didn’t understand it, and explaining helped me remember topics better.”

In addition to clickers, my use of technology in lecturing helped maintain student engagement. On the course website, I posted partial lecture notes for students to bring to class. During class, I wrote on the posted slides using a tablet computer. Students did
not have to hurry to write down every single thing I wrote, and were guided to the most important topics. To help students develop expert-like habits of thinking, it is critical that they see “many examples in which the same concept is at work” (*How People Learn*, National Academy Press, 2000). Therefore, I always explain key concepts in several different ways – for example, using both graphs and intuition to explain how consumption should be reallocated if a consumer’s marginal rate of substitution does not equal the price ratio. At the beginning of each topic’s slides, I included core learning outcomes. Before starting the chapter, students might not understand all the terms, but by referring back to the learning outcomes throughout lecture and after class, they could check to see whether they had achieved those outcomes. These also guided my writing of exams – I “taught to the test” in a positive way that was transparent and ensured students deeply understood the most important principles.

I also want students to think critically about economics by connecting current events to course material. In class, I played several episodes of “Planet Money”, a podcast from NPR. As we listened, I regularly paused the episode to ask clicker questions about key concepts we had just listened to, or anticipating segments to come. These activities were both fun for the students to see how and why economics matters in real life and buttressed their learning by reviewing difficult class material. Homework problems and exam questions also sought to get students to think critically; for example, I wrote an exam question asking students to draw a three-person production possibilities curve, which required them to apply the same principles about a two-person PPC to an unfamiliar situation.

In my teaching, I try to stay abreast of current research on effective pedagogy and implement it in the classroom. I care deeply about helping students learn, and am open to incorporating new methods and tools that can improve student achievement. To that end, I enrolled in “The College Classroom”, a semester long class about how students learn. I made clicker questions, and the peer instruction that accompanied them, an integral part of my classroom environment both because of the reasons enumerated above and because research has shown they improve student learning. That is likely not only because it increases engagement and allows for diverse approaches to learning, but also because students receive immediate feedback so they can check their own understanding.

Some of my best teachers, such as Michael Steinberger at Pomona, were superb at not just teaching the material, but also helping me to see why what we were learning mattered and how all the pieces of the course tied together. They showed me that teachers should not simply focus on teaching rote tasks, but should do everything possible to ensure that students have a firm grasp of the basic concepts, which forms the bedrock for the higher order thinking necessary to approach more difficult problems. I believe that by providing clear, organized lectures and fostering an active classroom environment that was welcoming to people of any background, I was able to achieve these goals for my students. I look forward to doing so for many more in the future.