

My Teaching Statement

Donald Liu

It is the nurturing of the mind, the empowering of the young and the challenge of trying to be a better teacher each day that makes teaching such a fulfilling and rewarding activity. Truly, it is the joy of teaching that drives a teacher to constantly strive for excellence.

As a teacher, I have come a long way. Being a non-native speaker of English, I immediately recognized one of my many challenges the first day I walked into my classroom twenty-five years ago. This realization of deficiency at an early stage in my teaching career was fortunate as it brought home the importance of “compensation.” Ever since that day, I have been actively seeking out good teaching strategies, methods, tools and technologies to compensate for my limitations. Through such efforts as organizing my lecture materials in a sensible way to enhance comprehension, embracing flexible teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles, adopting new classroom technologies to facilitate active learning, providing easy access to students to encourage them to seek help, establishing good rapport with students to bridge gaps and improve communication, and conducting myself in and outside the classroom in a professional and compassionate manner that engenders respect for all, not only have I been able to do more than just compensate for my limitations as a teacher, but I have also succeeded in drawing my students into the learning process.

To engage the student, good communication is essential. I have always made sure that my students understand that I care about them as individuals, and that I am interested in their academic success. I want the energy I bring to the classroom to be contagious, making my students become more enthusiastic in their learning. Regardless of the size of my class, I have always exerted the utmost effort to know each student as an individual, a fact they quickly notice and greatly appreciate. As part of this effort, I make it my practice to address each of my students by his/her first and last names by the end of the second week of the semester. This past semester, for example, I had 102 students in my class and I knew each one of them by the end of the first week of class.

I used to think that my paramount responsibility as a teacher was to expose my students to all the important topics in the field, and that as long as I conveyed the information effectively, my students would, in turn, learn it. Accordingly, I used to be very reluctant to give up precious lecture time for activities that facilitates collaborative and active learning. Over time, however, I realized that teaching without the active participation of the learner is like practicing democracy without the genuine involvement of the citizen. This insight helped me recognize the importance of transforming my teaching methodology from a passive, predominantly lecture-based system to a learner-centered one that encourages active student participation and teamwork as an integral part of the learning process.

To bring about this transformation, I developed a new pedagogical paradigm into which new classroom technology and the conventional learning cycle teaching practice coalesce. Each class session is divided into three to four learning cycles comprised of lecturing, problem solving/cooperative learning, discussion/critiquing, and summarization. Upon the completion of each lecture topic (every fifteen

minutes or so) a question is posed. Using the Personal Response System (PRS), equipped with a wireless transmitter, each student has the opportunity to enter his/her answer into the computer system within a specified timeframe (usually two minutes). In figuring out the answer, students are encouraged to pair up and work as a team. At the end of the question session, a student is selected to articulate to the class the reason underlying his/her answer and other students may be invited to either support or refute the answer given by the first student. At times, a team may be called upon to come to the front to explicitly solve the problem and explain the answer to the class. Before moving to the next lecture topic, I use the projection system to show a histogram summarizing class performance, then offer final remarks. This system has proven to be very effective in helping students stay reflective and focused, and it has encouraged the formation and strengthening of a learning community as the semester progresses.

While the PRS technology is certainly conducive for engaging the students, it is by no means the panacea, for there are at least three other critical elements contributing to the success of this pedagogical approach. First, it is important that the instructor create questions that are accessible, yet challenging enough to maintain the students' interest and encourage teamwork. Second, it is important that the instructor be conversant with classroom dynamics and use it to advantage, ensuring that discussions are facilitated rather than hampered. Third, it is important that the instructor develop a good rapport with the students and create an atmosphere that welcomes discussion. By encouraging open inquiry, I am able to draw my students into the intellectual process.

Over the course of my teaching career, I have become convinced of the importance of preparing students for global competency. This conviction has motivated me to incorporate a dimension of international perspectives into components of my microeconomic principles class. The revised course was certified in 2010 by the University of Minnesota as one with a global perspectives theme. In addition to various global perspectives related activities embedded throughout the semester, the students are now required to engage in two mock trial projects of the international court. Students in each discussion session are assigned to a judge panel, a plaintiff team, or a defense team, with the defense and plaintiff teams being further divided into a research group and a lawyer group. Each researcher produces a synopsis of his/her findings. Based on the synopses, the lawyer group generates a court brief detailing its arguments, and engages in oral debates during the court session. Upon reading the synopses and briefs from both sides, the judge panel presides over the trial and, subsequently, issue the majority, concurring and dissenting opinions. The setup and timing of the activities are such that students not only need to do the work of the field, they also need to work collaboratively and individually to construct new knowledge. While demanding from the perspective of instructor's time, students have indicated that they benefit from this high-impact learning activity.

After attending a series of workshops on online education and flipped classroom methodology, I have decided last year to transform my face-to-face courses into hybrid ones, seeking to engage my students at a high cognitive level through more hands-on activities. For that purpose, I have developed a set of multimedia online presentations and assessments, based on the R2D2 learning cycle of Bonk and Zhang (*Empowering Online Learning*, John Wiley & Sons, 2008). Each week students are required to go over the assigned online learning materials and complete an assessment before coming to class, during which they solve problems collaboratively, while my TAs and I circulate in the room to offer help as needed. Capitalizing on the strengths of both physical and virtual learning space, the flipped classroom approach has proved to be useful in engaging students and enhancing their learning. Based on the survey

conducted at the end of this pilot project last semester, students found the flipped classroom engaging and they enjoyed the opportunity of working with their peers and learning from one another.

As I become more seasoned an educator, I have begun to understand the importance of treating higher education as an integral part of the K-16 education system. It appears to me that educators at higher education institutions can contribute to the success of the K-16 system in at least three ways: (i) providing quality and relevant curriculum, top-notch instructional delivery, and informed career counseling for students in the last segment of the K-16 education pipeline; (ii) forming partnerships with the K-12 system to help strengthen its curriculum and instruction so as to bridge the gap between the two seemingly separated segments of the education pipeline; and (iii) building a deliberate feedback loop that prepares undergraduate students to pursue a career path of becoming K-12 teachers in their respective disciplines. To impact students' learning in a more deep-seated way, I have become interested in pursuing a path that facilitates the linkage between higher education and the K-12 system.

Since 2007, I have served as the Applied Economics Faculty Coordinator for the University of Minnesota's College in the Schools (CIS) Program, which is a nationally accredited concurrent enrollment partnership of the University and collaborating Minnesota high schools. By providing ongoing professional support, training, and workshops to a group of CIS high school teachers, I ensure the congruency of the CIS courses with the standards of the University of Minnesota. To further my efforts in enhancing K-12 teachers' content knowledge in economics, I have taken up the role of Executive Director of Minnesota Council on Economic Education (MCEE) almost four years ago. MCEE is a 501c(3) non-profit organization, housed in the Department of Applied Economics, that provides extensive professional development programs in economics and personal finance to K-12 educators in Minnesota, affecting the learning of more than 40,000 students annually. In this capacity, I have implemented a curriculum in food security, food safety and food trade, providing opportunities for high school students to learn about important global food issues through an economic lens. I have also spearheaded an online education program, allowing MCEE to reach more K-12 teachers outside of the Twin-Cities metropolitan area, including rural Minnesota, North and South Dakotas. Further, I have built a master teacher program in which a small corps of exceptional K-12 economic teachers brings classroom best practices to their peers, helping other K-12 teachers gain knowledge and skills in transferring complex economic concepts to their students. Finally, under my leadership, MCEE has worked very closely with various teacher licensure programs in higher education institutions in Minnesota, reaching pre-service teachers before they join the teaching profession.

To conclude, I come from another culture and have another language as my first tongue. I believe this is beneficial for me as an educator because I have learned many things from different perspectives. Both in my personal life and in my classroom, I have embraced the strengths of Western and Eastern cultures, while endeavoring to overcome the drawbacks of each. In so doing, I have found myself serving as a useful role model for my students, demonstrating that it is possible to strive for academic excellence in a learning environment that values integrity, responsibility, respect, compassion, humility, and open-mindedness. I continue to subscribe to this precept in my newer endeavor of working with K-12 teachers, helping them to equip their students with the economic and personal financial understanding needed to succeed in today's complex economy.