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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

"This requires, above all, that one be allowed to grow in the soil where one really belongs, but that is not always so easy to find." –Søren Kierkegaard¹

To make an academic discipline come alive, the teacher must be comfortable working in the terrain of the individual student mind. To this end, the teacher should be sound both in his knowledge of the subject, and in his appreciation of the backgrounds, interests, and needs of individual students. The teacher will in this way be able to use the specialized knowledge of his field to inform and illuminate those topics that are of special interest to his students. In the case of economics, core concepts and basic tools can shed light on almost any aspect of human affairs. Thus, if a teacher of economics has the right approach, students can easily come to see the advantages of a rigorous economic analysis of the topics that most interest them.

I obtained my undergraduate degree from a liberal arts college with majors in Economics and Engineering, continued my graduate education at a big research university, worked for a year at a major corporate consulting firm, and returned to teach Economics at a liberal arts college. During this diverse academic and professional career, I have had the good fortune of interacting with students, colleagues, and professors from a wide range of academic disciplines, intellectual backgrounds, and ideological inclinations. Thus even while developing specialized knowledge, I have consistently pursued a wider array of interests, through coursework as well as through lateral learning, independent reading, and discussion. Further, as a teacher, I have learned to use and develop this breadth: I seek points of confluence between the concepts that I am teaching and ideas that are already familiar to students. For example, while teaching macroeconomics, I make frequent use of newspaper and academic journal articles on topics such as the economic crisis, globalization, credit markets, student loans, and immigration to illustrate the workings of the economy. Homework assignments often require students to find relevant articles and discuss how they apply to the macro-economy using any of the models studied in class. So while my goal is always to encourage the development of higher order thinking skills that move beyond rote memorization and comprehension towards analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, I feel it is important to do so while working in the terrain of the individual student mind.

Within the classroom environment I have found that my approach fosters and harnesses the natural diversity of minds. I teach a course titled 'Contemporary Macroeconomic Issues' – in this course I have found that as I introduce various perspectives on questions central to economics, different students prefer different schools of thought and adopt different frameworks for their critical analyses. Sometimes, I force myself to play devil's advocate in order to illustrate the nuances of cogent but diverging opinions; on such occasions I am often rewarded by spirited discussions and healthy, respectful, and informed differences of opinion among students. Such in-class discussions also provide me the opportunity to explore the philosophical, mathematical, and psychological roots of economics and thereby help students obtain a deeper appreciation for economic theory.

This was also a top priority in my work as a teaching assistant, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, in Dr. Kendrick's innovative computational economics course. Every week a new problem-solving tool was introduced: students were given a simple pre-written code, often in a new programming environment, employing that particular tool. But students could also choose which problems to examine, and during the lab session for the week, they were asked to manipulate the code and use it to answer a problem that interested them. It was exciting to find that when applying tools to problems of their own choice, the students had a penchant for 'wandering off' on their own, often into uncharted territory spanning across diverse disciplines. So, on the one hand it was important to encourage creativity and sustain their passion, while on the other it was necessary to limit their models to a manageable level. By working with many different

¹ Kierkegaard, Søren. The Essential Kierkegaard. Eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. 3.

students in these classes, I was able to hone not just my own knowledge of the tools and their various applications, but also my ability to translate student interests into problems that can be solved using economic modeling and analysis. From my experience, I have become convinced of the value of this course in computational economics: while basic concepts and tools can be taught in lectures that include appropriate applications relevant to student interests, a course such as this helps students develop creative, analytical, quantitative, programming, research, writing, and presentation skills. If I were given the opportunity, I would be very excited to design and teach such a course.

My teaching philosophy is further illustrated by the exams I design for my classes. My objective is to view and follow the thought processes of the individual student as closely as possible. To this end, in small to medium sized classes I eschew multiple-choice questions and request students to show all of their work. In addition, I take the time to develop criteria by which partial-credit can be assigned in a consistent manner. By these measures I can derive a much more accurate understanding of misconceptions and weaknesses than is possible through a standard multiple-choice exam. More accurate understanding in turn allows me to respond more effectively to the general needs of the class and the particular requirements of each student. I can therefore offer criticisms and suggestions that are student-specific and present them constructively in order to motivate renewed independent investigation. For large classes, I attempt to achieve the same result by means of carefully designed multiple choice questions, minute papers, in-class dialog, and other modes of student feedback.

Finally, in order to nurture the optimal conditions for learning, I consider intellectual candor and a cooperative, supportive spirit of inquiry to be essential. Of course, this spirit should also extend outside the classroom, and I make my availability for students a top priority. For me, the ultimate reward from good teaching is the 'Eureka!' moment: The lit up eyes of a student who has grasped a difficult concept. Starting from my days as an undergraduate mentor and a graduate teaching assistant and on through my days as a visiting assistant professor at Trinity College, it has always been the reward of watching difficult concepts take root in the mind of the individual student that has motivated me to improve myself as a teacher.