

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Garrett Olson Stanford

Wherever I go, I am drawn to teaching. I experience an intrinsic joy in helping others, and I believe teaching is one of the most valuable and important ways I can make a positive contribution. At the University of Oregon, I teach a wide variety of economics courses as both the lead instructor of a class and a teaching assistant. I am a **proficient lead instructor** for courses in **microeconomics and environmental economics**, with **six terms of teaching experience**. My role as a **teaching assistant includes 16 courses**, ranging from introductory economics courses to graduate-level econometric and environmental economic courses. The classes I teach range from small groups of ten students to large lectures of over one hundred students. I am well-versed in course design, classroom management, and the task of balancing a full teaching load with an ambitious research schedule.

My passion for teaching developed long before I came to the University of Oregon. During my undergraduate studies at the University of Puget Sound, I worked at the university's tutoring center. My initial position as a writing tutor expanded to include Japanese language and economics. In recognition of my passion, my university paid for me to attend an international conference for college-level tutoring. During this time, I also led outdoor overnight trips for other students through the university's outdoor program. Eventually, I took on the role of training students to become outdoor leaders like me. I also volunteered at an elementary school and an after-school tutoring program for high schoolers from low-income households near the Puget Sound campus. After graduating, I joined the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program and moved to a small town in southern Japan to teach English. I served as the town's only native English speaker, teaching at the town's preschool, elementary school, and junior high school. I also taught a weekly English conversation class for the town's residents. During my second year as an English teacher, I presented at a professional development conference for other JET program teachers. Following my return from Japan, I worked as a skills trainer at a nonprofit organization that provided behavioral and mental healthcare for children. My role at this organization was to help children learn ways to overcome trauma, interact with their peers, and function successfully in a classroom. **These many experiences as an educator** prepared me to be successful as an instructor at the University of Oregon.

To be an effective teacher, there is **no substitute for experience**. I have been tempered by my successes and failures as an educator. There are, of course, differences in teaching English to an elderly Japanese farmer and the law of demand to a first-year student at the University of Oregon. However, I have found that many of the essential tenets of good teaching can be universally applied. There are many philosophies and experiences that shape my teaching

practice, but three essential ideas underpin my approach: (1) **Build trust with the students**, (2) **engage the students**, and (3) **meet the students where they are**.

Building trust in a classroom is crucial. My time teaching and living in Japan taught me that it is impossible to learn a new language without making mistakes. **Students are afraid to make mistakes if they do not trust their teacher to provide a judgment-free and safe learning environment.** This truth applies equally to teaching economics. I prioritize beginning each term by learning my students' names, who they are, and what challenges they might be dealing with outside the classroom. My ability to call students by their names fosters a connection, as does demonstrating an interest in their lives outside the classroom, such as by asking whether a student's sister liked their birthday present that was mentioned in the previous week. Conversations like these establish bonds and break down the top-down power structure from which many classrooms suffer. The students feel comfortable asking for help, attempting an answer to a challenging question during class, and speaking up if they have a critique of a particular economic theory (or my lackluster shoe collection). A humbling lesson I have learned as a teacher is to admit when I do not know the answer: "That's a great question. I don't know the answer, but I will look into it." This admission signals to students that it is acceptable to not know an answer and communicates that the classroom is a place for all of us to learn. When I follow up on their question during the next class, I model pursuing answers to unknown questions and signal to them that I take their input seriously and respect their intellect.

As a student and a teacher, I find that the **deepest and most enduring learning occurs when a student is engaged** with the material. However, keeping students engaged can be a difficult task. To increase student engagement, in my lectures I incorporate topics that are relevant to the students and make sure to provide students with chances to engage with the material. For example, we discuss effective management of the McKenzie River that runs alongside the University of Oregon. We talk about the different values—use and non-use values—of the river and consider the economic challenges and ethical dilemmas of various forms of management. I find that grounding the theory and models of economics on tangible and relevant examples helps students process and retain the course material. During lectures, after discussing an economic model, I introduce a current event (e.g., the 2021 ERCOT power outage in Texas) for us to analyze. The ensuing discussion gives students a chance to engage with *and* challenge the model by applying it to the current event. I find that using current events gives students more confidence in their intellectual ability to apply an economic lens.

I prioritize student engagement when designing my courses. **I construct courses that include a wide variety of assignments that offer freedom to students.** In addition to homework sets that help them practice more technical content from the course, I assign a podcast that discusses the history of logging and the environmental movement in

Oregon and ask students to write a reflective essay on it. This assignment has two main goals. The first is to connect what we talk about in the classroom with the real world. The other goal is to **encourage students to develop their critical thinking skills** and allow them more latitude to interpret the course content in their own way. I also assign a class presentation on any topic relevant to the course subject. The presentation permits students to dive into a topic that interests them, reversing the role of the lecturer and audience. I am frequently delighted with students' choices of topics. One student, whose grandfather is a farmer in Eastern Oregon, presented on the water management challenges his grandfather faces and the costs/benefits of various policy solutions. Another student used the presentation as an opportunity to apply an economic lens to examine the environmental crisis in her hometown of Jakarta.

Teaching an introductory microeconomics course during the fall of 2020 pushed me to think of ways to connect with the students and connect the students with the material. Sometimes this meant deviating from the syllabus to cover a topic that piqued the interests of the students. One day, having just finished our discussion of the supply side of the market, we spent the second half of the class discussing optimal firm behavior in the context of newly released versions of the Xbox and PlayStation videogame consoles. Shifting the conversation to a topic that was on their minds made for a lively discussion, and many students realized they understood the economic intuition much more clearly once they tried applying it to a topic with which they were knowledgeable. Other times, keeping students engaged involved empathizing with them when a topic is essential to the class, but not especially engaging to the average student (e.g., constrained optimization).

One of the biggest challenges of teaching in a classroom is to simultaneously challenge the advanced students while not leaving behind those who may be struggling with the material. **A student's success is reflected by their growth in a course; what this looks like for each student varies greatly.** I believe one of the most important things a student can learn is confidence in their ability to learn and to pursue knowledge. In addition to exposing students to the building blocks of economics, my aim as a teacher is to help individuals develop critical thinking skills and be confident in these skills. Accordingly, I **gravitate toward a teaching style that emphasizes the autonomy of the students and the teacher and avoids a top-down power structure.** My teaching style is to provide the right amount of structure and guidance while also empowering the students. One way I do this is to pause before an important topic and let the students consider the topic. For instance, when I introduce pollution and negative externalities, I give the students time to devise their own optimal policies *before* I discuss the typical policy approaches. I ask students to think about the benefits of their policy, the costs of their policy, and the distributional impact of their policy. These types of open-ended activities permit all students, regardless of skill level, to build confidence and participate. An additional benefit of student-led learning is that I am better able to assess students' strengths and areas where they struggle. By giving

students time at the end of class to work on problem sets, I can observe which students are excelling, which students are struggling, and places where it would benefit the class for further instruction on my part. While the students are working on the problem sets, I make my way around the room and work with each student or each group of students. This approach gives me a much clearer assessment of how students are doing and minimizes the stigma of asking for help. Additionally, every syllabus I design now includes space for easy course-schedule adjustments, so that the course has the flexibility to maximize the benefit of the students. I understand the importance of structure and making expectations clear. **I also believe the best classroom is not a place organized around evaluating students but rather a place designed for students to learn and grow.**

My role as an educator has varied considerably over the last ten years. **The breadth of experience as an educator demonstrates my passion for teaching.** I am still in touch with many of my past students; I receive questions from across the Pacific regarding the complexities of English grammar; university peers will send me essays for feedback; students from my past courses at the University of Oregon ask me for letters of recommendation, invite me to their graduation celebrations, frequently join the weekly basketball game I organize, and are always quick to approach me when they see me around the campus. The lasting relationships I have with my students reflect my commitment to my students and to a teaching style that emphasizes my students' long-term success. I hope my passion for helping students grow—along with the breadth and depth of my experiences—make me a worthy educator of your students.