

Jon Oliver
University of Illinois at Chicago
601 S. Morgan St., 725 UH
Chicago, IL 60607

Teaching Statement

I have always been dedicated to teaching, having first served as a volunteer economics tutor while an undergraduate student. I have actively pursued teaching responsibilities while in graduate school, from leading recitation sections of introductory economics courses, to serving as the instructor for several intermediate courses at the undergraduate level. This year, I began tutoring at the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Metropolitan Correctional Center in Chicago, Illinois. Topics covered a range of material, and served to prepare individuals for the General Educational Development test. This semester I am teaching the intermediate Statistics for Economics course at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and look forward to lecturing again in the Spring semester. These experiences have solidified my desire to work at a university that highly values teaching.

My teaching philosophy has the following major components:

- Commitment to diversity.
- Teaching skills in addition to content.
- Using real world applications and examples.
- Using activities in the classroom.
- Forming personal relationships with students.

Commitment to diversity

The University of Illinois at Chicago is continuously ranked by U.S. News & World Report as one of the top 10 most diverse universities in the country. While I maintain high standards for all students, I believe that it is necessary for me to meet students where they are, not where I might want them to be. One method that helps me match my instruction to students' needs is regularly assessing their understanding of the material through weekly quizzes and review questions. While I do not grade their answers for credit, this exercise allows students to honestly assess their own comprehension of the material, and gives me an accurate picture of whether they understand the content. In cases where I misjudged the difficulty of a section, I modify my approach to ensure that students can reasonably master the material.

Teaching skills in addition to content

In addition to teaching economic concepts, it is important to help students improve their problem solving, writing, and technical reading skills. I help students improve these skills by requiring that

they think critically in answering in-class example questions, homework assignments, and projects. Additionally, I believe reading and writing skills are particularly important in economics. In my Economics of Sports and Entertainment course, students are required to submit a business proposal for a hypothetical sports team, using only their pre-existing knowledge at the beginning of the semester. A similar assignment is completed towards the end of the semester, encouraging students to reflect on their prior decisions and allowing them to update their choices based on their newly acquired knowledge. All of my courses require students to examine technical readings, and class discussions allow them to openly communicate their thoughts. As in many aspects of my teaching strategy, I provide multiple options for students to demonstrate their understanding of course material.

Using real world applications and examples

In my Intermediate Microeconomics course and Statistics for Economics course, students interact with a new dataset each week using Excel, chosen for its relevance and accessibility. They learn to apply the concepts presented in class and are encouraged to discuss their findings. This hands-on approach piques the interest of students and I incorporate it into my classroom as often as possible.

Using activities in the classroom

I believe that activities and simulations contribute to and reinforce student understanding. For example, in my Economics of Sports and Entertainment course, we play a semester-long game called “The Big Leagues” which incorporates nearly every aspect of the course material. To play, students manage their very own sports teams via internet-linked Google spreadsheets, making every decision from choosing a host city and stadium size, to drafting players and setting their weekly lineup, among many others. The interconnected spreadsheets allows for live, anonymous bidding on free-agents and coaches, as well as competition or collusion with their classmates in order to maximize individual profits. Repeated weekly games allow students to learn from previous mistakes and apply new concepts introduced throughout the semester to their decisions. I believe that the ideal simulation is “real” in the sense that students analyze data that is produced by their own activity. A key component of the game is that their choices matter; students use the profits amassed throughout the semester to “buy” up to 200 points of their final grade.

Forming personal relationships with students

I maintain an open door policy with my students, providing extended office hours throughout the week for students with conflicting schedules as well as during times of heightened demand. I also use office hours at the beginning of the semester to meet with students and discuss their interests and what strategies will help them be successful in the course. Getting to know my students fosters a sense of community in the classroom and can also facilitate learning. In particular, when tutoring at the Metropolitan Correctional Center, many of the individuals doubted their ability to master the content, and I believe that 1-on-1 meetings boosted their confidence and gave me valuable information to provide individualized support.

Conclusion

My general teaching philosophy is one of objective-based learning in which lectures, activities, simulations, and assessments are all designed with the students in mind. I begin designing a course with specific content and skill goals, and each component of the course is linked to one or many of these goals. Constant feedback and dialogue with students throughout the semester ensures that my teaching methods are effective, and that students are learning the material.