My Past and Current Teaching Description (How I Have Tried to Help Students Think)

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Abstract

In this "teaching statement", I describe my past and current teaching, or how I have tried to help students think, over the past thirteen years as an assistant and associate professor of economics. The contents are divided into four brief sub-sections as follows: Teaching My Field of Labor Economics to Undergraduates, Teaching Graduates Labor and How to Produce Research, Teaching Students to Prepare for Their Own Labor Market, and The Quantity and Quality of My Teaching, with Tables, Figures, and References appearing at the end.

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1. Teaching My Field of Labor Economics to Undergraduates

Four of the eight courses that I have ever taught have been in my field of labor economics (ECON 331, ECON 431, ECON 431/531, and ECON 531), the field where I received my doctoral training and produced almost all of my research. I have had the opportunity to teach my field on twenty-nine occasions (63 percent of all classes taught) to a total of 623 undergraduates (50 percent of all taught) and 65 graduate students (65 percent of all taught). I have taught ECON 331 three times to 193 students, ECON 431 fourteen times to 420 students, the blended ECON 431-531 once to 10 undergraduates and 3 graduates, with another blended class to come in 2020-21, and ECON 531 ten times to 62 graduate students.

My first undergraduate labor economics course was ECON 431 in 2010, which has become the stalwart to disseminate my knowledge of the field. This was later joined by ECON 331, with its higher cap of 65 students, more than double the cap of 30 for ECON 431. These two courses (ECON 331 and ECON 431) typically cover the main topics of labor economics, namely labor market equilibrium, labor supply, labor demand, compensating differentials, human capital, labor mobility, distribution, and discrimination. ECON 331 additionally serves as a bridge between ECON 281 and ECON 431, with its easier calculation-based questions on assignments and exams, rather than the more open-ended, essay questions at the 400-level. The evaluative materials have often been two assignments and two exams.

Both of these undergraduate labor economics courses are based on my own undergraduate exposure to labor economics at Rutgers University in the fall of 1999 during my senior year. It was taught by Professor Mark Killingsworth, who is well-known for his work on one of the main subjects of labor economics, labor supply, for which he co-authored a handbook chapter in the first volume of the *Handbook of Labor Economics* [16], as well as sole-authored a book [15]. Interestingly enough, when I first arrived at the University of Alberta, I notified my previous professor that I was now teaching the same course that he taught me, but over a decade later, in 2010. He rewarded this news by providing me with all of his latest teachings materials, which I then used, together with my own previous notes on labor economics, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, to construct my courses.

Another major influence from my time with Professor Killingsworth at Rutgers was the textbook that we used: the first edition (1996) of George Borjas's *Labor Economics* [4]. This was the only textbook during undergraduate that I had ever read all the way through, from cover to cover, over many days and nights spent on the second floor of the Kilmer Library on Livingston Campus (now named the James Dickson Carr Library). When I began to teach labor economics at the University of Alberta in 2010, I used first used the fifth edition of Borjas (2010) [5], and then the sixth edition (2013) [6], and then the last edition I used was the seventh (2016) [7], which the final hard cover version for Canada. Had I continued to use Borjas as my textbook, I would have adopted the eighth edition (2020) [8], which was only made available as an "international", soft cover version in Canada. With all eight editions of Borjas currently sitting on my office bookshelf, you can say that I was quite the fan.

There is, however, one major reason that I am no longer using Borjas, as I am currently in the process of writing my own labor economics textbook. In August of 2019, exactly twenty years since my introduction to the subject of labor economics, I signed a contract and began working with Oxford University Press to do this. It will be an adaption for the Canadian market, based off of a US textbook, *Labor Economics: Principles in Practice*, written by Professor Kenneth McLaughlin of Hunter College of the City University of New York (CUNY) system. He will also serve as the primary co-author on the adaption, *Labor Economics: Principles in Practice, Canadian Edition* [23], which will be based off of the second US edition [22], published in 2019. I have been using this edition for my current and forthcoming teaching of labor economics. The first edition of the book [21] was published in 2016, so this is a very new book to begin with. The first Canadian edition [23] is being written for release in late 2021, just in time to adopt it as my textbook for winter 2022.

Why was writing a textbook on labor economics, especially the adaption of this particularly textbook, important to me? First, writing a textbook was on my career bucket list of things to accomplish, and I am very proud that I am now putting in the work to achieve that goal. Second, I now have the opportunity to expose the content of my established courses in the field of labor economics to a larger audience. Related to the adaptation of this particular textbook, my class has always been focused on broader North American research, with practical examples currently given on the US being mostly about Canada in the future. In addition, it is focused on students "getting their hands dirty" with data. Currently, the data for the US version is based on the use of the Current Population Survey (CPS), and the Canadian version will instead be based on the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

According to Gregory Mankiw's recent *Journal of Economic Literature* article on writing textbooks [17], the textbook market is like a tournament, where the rewards from competition with other authors are distributed highly unevenly, meaning that "the benefits of writing the *tenth* best textbook for a course are small." Luckily, in my particular case, there are currently only a few Canadian labor economics textbooks [3, 10, 11]. And, as far as I can tell, only one of these textbooks remains active and up-to-date, *Labour Market Economics, Eighth Edition* [3], by Professors Benjamin, Gunderson, Lemieux, and Riddell from McGraw-Hill Ryerson, of which I had reviewed the seventh edition [2]. The other two textbooks [10, 11], from Nelson Education and Pearson Addison Wesley, were last updated in 2013 and 2004.

2. Teaching Graduates Labor and How to Produce Research

I have also taught labor economics to graduate students eleven times, teaching ECON 531 ten times to 62 students and the blended ECON 431/531 once to 3 graduate students (with another blended course to come in 2020-21). Whereas ECON 331 and ECON 431 at the undergraduate level were my stalwarts for labor economics, both ECON 531 and ECON 431/531 at the graduate level have definitely been my opportunities to experiment. Comparatively speaking, ECON 531 was the first labor economics course that I had ever taught, and ECON 431-531 is currently the most recent labor economics course that I have taught.

For an example of this experimentation, ECON 531 went from being constructed from the notes taken during my own graduate labor economics courses at Syracuse University, with Professor Dan Black (currently with the University of Chicago) and Professor Jeff Kubik, to something wholly my own over the past thirteen years. With regard to the range of topics, it has sometimes covered the same traditional topics as my undergraduate labor economics courses, but with more advanced math and econometrics, and more exposure to original research in the field. However, it has also gone so far as to limit its topics as narrow in scope as to local labor markets, my specialty, with coverage of the traditional topics only seen through that lens. Another form of experimentation in ECON 531 is that sometimes students were required to take an exam, or write a paper, or sometimes both. This experimentation allows the class to be tailored to any particular cohort of students.

In my most recent ECON 431/531 for winter 2020, this experimentation continued. Here, the role of the graduate students, in this blended course, was basically to help me teach this course to the undergraduates, i.e. be intermediaries of the information. In doing so, they (hopefully) learned the material faster and in greater detail, by giving their own presentations to the class on selected topics, for example. Another form of recent experimentation in this course was the use of Packback: software which allowed me to ask my students to find Canadian examples of the topics that we were discussing in class and document their answers. Undergraduates were allowed to use popular media articles, whereas graduate students had to find academic articles in reputable journals, with proper citation necessary for both.

In addition to teaching labor economics to graduate students, I have also taught graduate students how to produce their own research. Let me begin by first focusing in on the doctoral students and then working my way down to the masters students and describing all of the other roles that I have been involved in. My most structured role in helping doctoral students to produce research has been my teaching of our Graduate Research Workshop I (ECON 591), which is basically tailored toward PhD students in their second year of study, although it occasionally has had a first or third year student. I have taught ECON 591 six times thus far, to a total of 26 students, with another one to come in the winter term of 2020-21. This is based on my own experiences in the dissertation workshop at Syracuse, but the difference is that cohorts of students there remained enrolled in the workshop until they graduated.

This doctoral workshop helps students build their presentation and paper writing skills, with the goal of having them conduct their own independent empirical research in economics, as well as aid in the professionalism required of a PhD candidate. All enrolled students are expected to participate, present, and produce research over several scheduled intervals throughout the semester. The course begins with an accounting of their portfolios thus far, i.e. their resumes, all papers previously written, and all presentations given, in order to form a basis of what they have already accomplished. We then go through several rounds of production of their new papers and presentations, switching one for the other every other round until their dissertation chapter drafts are due at the end of the semester, with the hope that they pass it to their proposed adviser soon after all feedback has been incorporated.

Their papers and presentations are evaluated based on their incorporation of the following research ingredients: 1) a clear statement of your research question, 2) an explanation of its importance (use numbers), 3) a description of the market and/or policy you examine, 4) your synthesis of the relevant literature with references, 5) potential data sources that you can and do use, 6) a theoretical explanation of the main relationships, 7) your identifying variation and empirical strategy, 8) the visualization of your evidence (figures and tables), and 9) your original contribution to the economics literature. These have been honed by me over the past decade, across my research production courses, my own research, and my independent research supervision, with some success in turning ideas into publishable research.

Moving on to aiding in the research production for our masters students, I have previously coordinated (ECON 900) and am currently coordinating (ECON 999) their Directed Research Project. The reason for the two different course numbers is that the thesis portion of our masters program in the Department of Economics at the University of Alberta switched from being an independent research project carried out under the guidance of a supervisor and the coordinator of the course (ECON 900) to a course-based approach with the coordinator of the course basically serving as the supervisor and second readers in each field refereeing the final papers (ECON 999). I will not actually teach ECON 999 until the spring and summer terms of 2021, but I would imagine that it will foster the development of valuable skills and help train future researchers, much in the same manner as described for the PhD students.

I have also served in several supervisory roles for the independent research of thirty-seven students, thirty-six graduate and one undergraduate, the details of which appear on my CV. At the doctoral level, I have been a co-supervisor once, a committee member once with two students in progress, a candidacy chair twice, and an arm's length examiner once. At the masters level, I have been a main adviser five times with one incomplete, a second reader thirteen times, a coordinator nine times, and an arm's length examiner once. At the bachelors level, I have served as a supervisor once. In addition, I have published two academic journal articles and one research report with three different graduate students [14, 19, 20], and I am currently producing two journal articles with two different graduate students [1, 11]. Lastly, I currently employ four students working on my research team through the Canada First Research Excellence Fund and have written a total of 86 reference letters for students.

3. Teaching Students to Prepare for Their Own Labor Market

I have also taught intermediate microeconomic theory (ECON 281) seven times to a total of 519 undergraduate students. This is the largest amount of students that I have ever taught for one course, although I have taught my field to slightly more undergraduate students as a whole, between ECON 331, ECON 431, and ECON 431/531. Given that my time in graduate school was mainly focused on research rather than on teaching, and that my funding sources were research-oriented, ECON 281 at the University of Alberta in 2007 was actually the first undergraduate course that I had ever taught, outside of a few guest lecturing opportunities at Syracuse. And yet even then, when I had not yet taught my field of labor economics nor taught students how to produce research, the end goal for my students was the same: you need to prepare yourselves for your own labor market.

The first step in this process, as shown in the sub-title of this teaching statement, is that I attempt to teach students *how* to think, rather than *what* to think. I often consider my fields of labor economics and microeconomics, and the discipline of economics more generally, as offering ways for individuals to think. To me, this is the main difference between a discipline and an ideology. And, it might also be the difference in the shelf life of your course material in a student's mind. When you think of questions in a job interview, very rarely are they oriented towards recalling a specific answer from your knowledge base. Rather, they are typically oriented towards gauging the candidate's ability to think.

Given the rapid expansion of technology in the workplace over the last several decades and the ever shrinking cost of computing power, the value of content memorization and recall has decreased, while the value of applying content to analyze real world situations has increased. As I often say to my students, the first step to thinking critically about a subject is the ability to first turn on one's brain. This process will vary from person to person, so each individual must find out for themselves how to achieve mental clarity and provide their full attention on cue. Only then can a student be able to think on their feet about a given subject and apply it to practical problems that they will come across once they are employed. If their environment on the job changes later on, for example, they should be able to effectively respond to that change.

However, the ability to think brilliantly on cue does not mean much if those thoughts cannot be communicated brilliantly as well. Many students will go on to take jobs that require that their thoughts and ideas be verbally articulated. I try to develop these skills among my students through interactions during the lectures, in my office hours, and just in passing by in the hall or on campus. I stress that a correct answer is of lesser value when it cannot be communicated properly, and it is this skill that will matter a great deal upon graduation. I also try to ensure that each and every student learns how to write a proper essay that incorporates their own individual perspective on a given subject. Participation in class discussions and original writing are also conditions for me to provide a recommendation letter for students upon graduation. While the memorization of facts and techniques will wear off rather quickly after a few years, the ability to think critically and communicate your thoughts will last a lifetime.

Lastly, I feel that it is very important for students to think about their labor market as far ahead of time as possible. Most surprisingly, both undergraduates and graduates spend very little of their time thinking about what their lives will be like once they graduate. The reason why I know that to be the case is that I directly ask my undergraduates to describe their own labor market, typically on an assignment in my labor economics course, and they usually respond that this is the first time that anyone had asked them to think about that. At the graduate level, I spend the first class of my research production courses explaining what the labor market looks like for our masters and doctoral graduates, and then, I describe what they need to do in order to get there (i.e. write great research papers). Again, for many of these students, this is the first time that they had thought about that end goal.

4. The Quantity and Quality of My Teaching Output

Overall, I have taught eight different courses, a total of forty-six times, with the number of classes shown annually and cumulatively by undergraduate and graduate level in Table 1. Over my thirteen years as an assistant and associate professor of economics, I have taught an average of three-and-a-half classes per year, with deviations from the usual four-course load documented within the table notes. Twenty-five of these classes were at the undergraduate level (ECON 281, ECON 331, ECON 431, and the 400-level portion of ECON 431/531), and

and twenty-one were at the graduate level (the 500-level portion of ECON 431/531, ECON 531, ECON 591, ECON 900, and ECON 999).

I have had the opportunity to teach my field of labor economics (ECON 331, ECON 431, ECON 431/531, ECON 531) on twenty-nine occasions, eighteen times to undergraduates (ECON 331, ECON 431, and the 400-level portion of ECON 431/531) and eleven times to graduates (ECON 531 and the 500-level portion of ECON 431/531). I have also taught intermediate microeconomics (ECON 281) to undergraduates seven times. I have played several other important teaching roles in our graduate program, having presided seven times over our doctoral dissertation workshop (ECON 591) and having previously coordinated and currently coordinating our masters research program (ECON 900 and ECON 999).

I have taught a total of 1,242 students, 1,142 at the undergraduate level and 100 at the graduate level, also shown in Table 1, not including supervisory research roles which are quantified separately below. My undergraduate enrollments were highest early on due to the teaching of ECON 281, with its course cap of 75 students. In comparison, the 300-level cap is 65 students, the 400-level cap is 30 students, and the blended cap for ECON 431/531 is 10 undergraduates and 4 graduates. My graduate enrollments were at ten or more students three times: due to a large cohort in ECON 531 and my coordination of ECON 900 in 2010-11, large cohorts in both ECON 531 and ECON 591 in 2012-13, and my largest cohort of doctoral students for ECON 591 occurring in 2019-20. I have also served in several supervisory roles for the independent research of thirty-seven students, thirty-six graduate and one undergraduate, the details of which appear on my CV. Lastly, I currently employ four students working on my research team through the Canada First Research Excellence Fund and have written a total of 86 reference letters for students.

One common way to gauge the effectiveness of teaching is to turn to the Instructor-Designed Questionnaire (IDQ) student evaluation scores. At the University of Alberta, five of these questions are summarized for professors at the end of each course, with a minimum of eight students required per course. Three of these IDQ questions are regarding excellence: "Overall, the quality of the course content was excellent" (IDQ 25), "Overall, this instructor was excellent" (IDQ 221), and "Overall, this course is excellent" (IDQ 3). The other two IDQ questions have to do with recommendations: "I would recommend this course to other students" (IDQ 137) and "I would recommend this instructor to other students" (IDQ 138).

The trends in my student evaluation scores for the excellence questions (IDQ 25, IDQ 221, and IDQ 3) are shown as annual averages across, all of the courses that I have taught in an academic year, in Figure 1. The individual scores by course and semester for the instructor excellence question (IDQ 221) can be seen on my curriculum vitae. In addition, the trends in the scores for the recommendation questions (IDQ 137 and IDQ 138) and the course trends for any of the five IDQ scores, as well as copious amounts of open-ended student feedback, can all be provided upon request. There was no feedback provided for the most recent academic year of 2019-20, due to the University response to covid-19.

In general, these courses have been well received by my students, as shown in Figure 1. First, the quality of my teaching, as indicated by these student evaluation scores, has been at or above the departmental averages of 4.2, 4.4, and 4.1, respectively, in all but my first two years of teaching. Given that I had only ever guest lectured during graduate school and never actually taught my own course until my first academic year of 2007-08 at the University of Alberta, this would suggest that these average teaching scores were a good starting point. Second, given this average starting point for my first years of teaching, one can easily see the steepness of my learning curve, at least with regard to how my teaching is perceived, over the next four to five years.

Third, once those first five years of rapid improvement in teaching were under my belt, from 2007-08 to 2011-12, I continued to maintain that level of excellence over the next seven years, from 2011-12 to 2018-19. In fact, all three scores reached their maximums during this time, in 2014-15 to 2016-17 for IDQ 25, with an average of 4.6, and in 2017-18 for IDQ 221 and IDQ 3, with an average of 4.7. This means that the most effective teacher that I have ever been has happened very recently. These maximums were followed by incremental dips in all three scores in the subsequent year or two, namely 2018-19. The reason for this anomaly year is two-fold, with a specific explanation and a more general one. The specific reason was a teaching of ECON 331, having not taught at the 300-level for six years. But, this will eventually payoff later on, as 300-level students will also be an audience for my textbook.

The more general explanation for any recent score declines is that, at least in my case, the few years prior to my promotion and tenure decision in 2013-14 had been more focused on research (see curriculum vitae and research statement). This is also likely to be the case in the run-up years to my promotion to full professor, under consideration in 2020-21. The benefit of this additional focus on research seems to come with the cost of less of a less-than-optimal focus on teaching in those years. In addition, the increase in my service activities between the tenure and promotion decision in 2013-14 and my current promotion under consideration in 2020-21 has likely resulted in a larger penalty to teaching in recent years (see service statement). That said, I continue to invest the time to enhance my teaching materials and methods, especially with an undergraduate textbook currently in production.

Tables

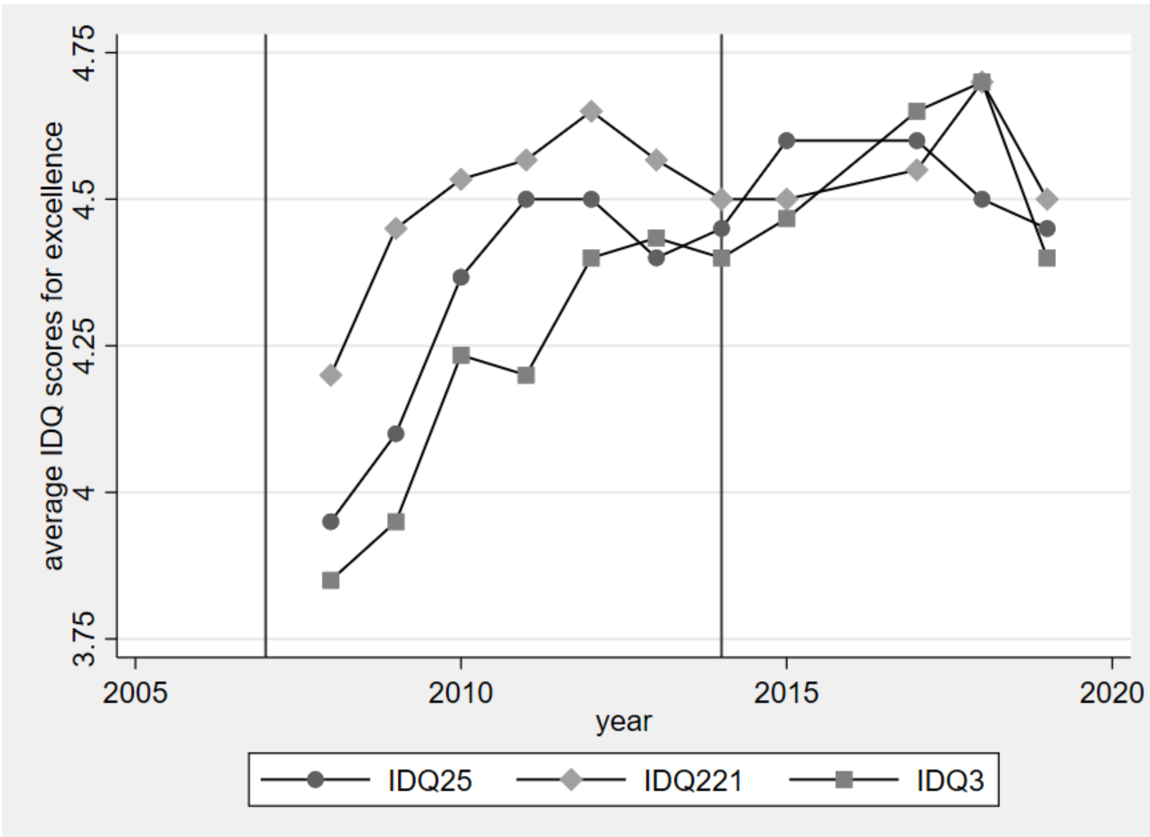
Table 1: Total Classes and Students Taught By Academic Year End

Year End	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	17	18	19	20	21	Total
Undergrad:														
Courses	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	0.5	0.5	25
Students	146	149	180	95	104	94	60	90	60	61	93	10	(10)	1,142
Graduate:														
Courses	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	2	2	1	1.5	3.5	21
Students	6	8	3	19	8	13	8	4	8	6	5	12	(3)	100

Notes: I had a one course reduction in the 2007-08 and 2008-09 academic years, I bought out a course due to a non-paid leave in 2011-12, I had a deferred full sabbatical in 2015-16, I had a graduate class canceled in 2018-19, and I had a half sabbatical in 2019-20. Blended courses ending in 2020 and 2021 are split as half (0.5) undergraduate and half (0.5) graduate. Student numbers in parentheses are those currently enrolled, but these students are not included in the totals.

Figures

Figure 1: Instructor-Designed Questionnaire (IDQ) Scores for Excellence



Notes: IDQ25 is “Overall, the quality of the course content was excellent,” IDQ221 is “Overall, this instructor was excellent,” and IDQ3 is “Overall, this was an excellent course,” all on a 5-point scale. Vertical lines indicate the year of hire as an assistant professor (2007) and the year of promotion to associate professor with tenure (2014). Due to covid-19, IDQ scores were not collected for courses in the winter semester of the 2019-20 academic year.

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