Teaching Statement – Vasudeva Ramaswamy (Oct. 2024)

My teaching philosophy is centered on fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, where students are challenged to think independently and encouraged to collaborate effectively, while using the wide range of computational tools available to them. At American University, I've had the opportunity to support a diverse student body through courses at the Ph.D. level (Macroeconomics, Mathematical Economic Analysis), the Masters level (International Economics & Finance, Agent-based Computational Economics), and the advanced undergraduate level (Intermediate Macroeconomics). Throughout this experience, I've sought to put this philosophy into practice.

Creating a Supportive and Inclusive Environment   A key aspect of my teaching is creating a classroom environment that is supportive and welcoming. I strongly believe that every student, regardless of their background, has the potential to succeed if given the opportunity. In practice, this means I try to set students up for success using a variety of teaching methods—lectures, interactive discussions, hands-on coding sessions, and group projects—to ensure that all students are engaged in learning. I also ensure that students are aware of all resources available to them, inside and outside the classroom. This includes prioritizing being approachable and responsive myself, and encouraging students to ask questions and express themselves freely.

Encouraging Independent Learning   I encourage students to think independently and approach problems creatively. AI-assisted tools like ChatGPT and GitHub Copilot have made it extremely easy to find solutions to problems but increased the risk of students not engaging with a problem beyond finding the correct answer to a specific question. My approach has been to encourage students to use AI tools as appropriate while emphasizing the importance of formulating the right questions and identifying when to employ techniques they have learned. For example, with graduate students, I note that ChatGPT is useful in implementing an instrumental variable regression in any desired programming language, but identifying that the research design violates the exogeneity assumption in the first place requires critical engagement with their question and subject. In problem sets that I design for undergraduate students, in addition to finding the correct answer to a question, I elicit understanding of principles learned in the classroom and recognition of implications of these principles through applied problems.

Fostering Collaboration   Collaboration is a critical skill for any economist. I actively promote teamwork in my classes through group projects, coding sessions, and class discussions. This also helps foster a sense of community in the classroom and prepares students for careers where teamwork and joint problem-solving are vital skills. A practical collaboration tool is to use version control software, which has the added benefit of building good coding practices. Git and GitHub make code management more efficient and facilitate collaboration, which is crucial when working with interdisciplinary and frequently multinational teams. Learning to use version control early on also instills the value in students of making their analysis replicable and raising the bar for doing research.

Equipping Students with Practical Skills   Engaging with a rapidly evolving field like economics means being comfortable with increasingly complex and interdisciplinary analytical methods. Implementing such methods require confidence with a variety of programming languages. At the Ph.D. level, I try to expose students to open-source languages like Python, Julia, and R. These are indispensable for data analysis and also promote collaboration with researchers who might otherwise be excluded from using costly proprietary software. Here too, AI-assisted tools can lower the barriers to entry to learning programming, allowing students to focus on substantive questions without being constrained by their familiarity with specific languages. Additionally, I try to help students develop practical skills like project management in preparation for their future careers. This includes helping students develop their own work plans and timelines based on course deadlines, work effectively in groups, learn to identify when they might need help and ask for it early on. Skills like goal-setting and time management are as vital as subject matter expertise, and I seek to design my courses to allow students to demonstrate and build these skills.

In summary, my teaching philosophy is to create an environment that is inclusive, collaborative, and intellectually stimulating. My goal is to equip students not just with the knowledge to excel academically but with the skills and confidence to continue learning and solving complex problems throughout their careers.