

STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

KEVIN DINH ¹
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

Teaching is a deeply personal experience because of my own struggles navigating the education system. It also allows me to honor the educators who have helped me along the way. One person in particular, Dr. Stephanie Strand, has shaped my teaching philosophy by showing me the power of effective communication and thoughtfulness in helping students engage. During a lecture on DNA replication, our class could not grasp how the body mitigates the incidence of genetic mutation during the replication process. After a flurry of questions, Dr. Strand paused, reflected, and admitted that she had been defaulting to jargon to explain this process. She re-explained everything using traffic signs as analogies, and the class finally understood. She then thanked everyone for helping her realize she didn't understand the process well enough to explain it without jargon, and said that a good teacher should be able to explain anything simply. Seeing someone who is clearly an expert in her field approach our class with such humility and thoughtfulness inspired me to approach my students with the same level of care. I believe learning is iterative, so my goal is to familiarize students with this process, so they leave my class confident in their ability to learn anything. I aim to do this through storytelling, direct communication, and emphasizing the importance of practice.

Storytelling, which for me means motivating a concept with interesting real-world examples, sits at the heart of my approach. Telling a good story requires that I understand the material and my target audience. I consider the purpose of a concept and the technical aspects such as equations or variables driving the results. I think about the multiple ways to represent the material so that I am prepared to give different examples. For example when teaching instrumental variables, I sometimes draw Venn diagrams to illustrate "good" and "bad" variable correlations if students fail to understand the two-stage approach. In order to find examples that engage my students, I consider their lived experiences. I usually ask my students what their career goals are or what they did over the weekend and use this information throughout lectures. Some examples of this include asking my students if they have ever wondered how TikTok's algorithm knows which videos to recommend to motivate linear regression and why forcing yourself to attend a Taylor Swift concert because you have a ticket, despite struggling with depression satisfies the sunk-cost fallacy. I believe this process helps to build trust with my students. They see that I am interested in them, which helps them to stay engaged.

I also strive to be as conversational and direct with my students as possible to encourage engagement. I check in with the class regularly, asking them for feedback on my pacing and if I am being clear enough. I scan the room as I talk, checking facial expressions, the amount of eye contact, or the speed at which students nod their heads. If something feels off, I stop lecturing and ask students for feedback. I emphasize that the point of my lectures is for them, and I am OK with covering repeating material if things are unclear. When students share their thoughts, I thank them for being honest and make sure to never shame them. This approach may not appeal to all students, especially those who are more introverted. I also ask my students to close their eyes, to show a closed fist if I should slow down, or a thumbs up if the pace is OK. Over time, my students trust that I have their best interest at heart. I applied this approach most often when I taught Health Economics, a particularly demanding course because it requires students to learn coding, statistics, and facts about the healthcare market. Students, after both courses, awarded me with an average rating of 5 out of 5 for teaching effectiveness.

Finally, I strongly believe in the importance of repetition and patience in the learning process. One of my volleyball coaches growing up often emphasized the goal of leaving every practice 1 percent better than when we started—that becoming good at the sport requires practicing the movements until they become second nature. When I worked at my school's math tutoring center, instead of solving problems for students who struggled, I created an easier version of the problem. I asked students to first brainstorm different ways to approach the problem and encouraged them to pick the path that felt most promising. If the route led to a dead end, I

¹kevdinh@ucdavis.edu.

encouraged them to try another path until they arrive at the solution. Then I created a more difficult problem and repeated the process. By the end, students will have solved a problem similar to the one they originally struggled with. Along the way, I usually ask the students to identify the differences across each problem. I challenge them to see the pattern and to understand the nuances, so they are not simply memorizing. This process helps build their mathematical intuition and shows them the power of practice and repetition. It is very important that I instill confidence in my students. I want to show them how to study effectively and encourage them to push through, to keep practicing, and after enough rest, to practice some more.

While my approach to teaching has been well-received so far, as evidenced by my teaching evaluations, I am still committed to growing as an educator. I am currently working on an intervention program that aims to bolster math skills among undergraduates, currently being implemented at UC Davis and UC Irvine (and soon at UC Santa Barbara). This project has allowed me to connect to other educators across multiple disciplines who are committed to student learning. I plan on fostering these connections so that I can continue learning from them. I also intend on attending seminars and workshops at UC Davis's Center for Teaching Effectiveness. My experience thus far prepares me to teach a number of courses including Principles of Microeconomics, Intermediate Microeconomics, Health Economics, Financial Economics, Money and Banking, Macroeconomic Development, Mathematics for Economics, Introduction to Statistical Analysis, and Econometrics. I have invested so much of myself to teaching because it is a deeply personal experience. As a Vietnamese refugee whose parents never finished high school, I had to depend mainly on myself to navigate the American education system. I owe much of my success to several teachers along the way who understood effective pedagogy and cared about my personal development. However, I also recall the times when I struggled, felt helpless and frustrated at my circumstances and inability to learn. This is why I strive to approach my students with such care. Having experienced both the highs of excelling and the lows of struggling, I can sympathize with students from different backgrounds. Taking care of my students is my way of taking care of myself. It's my way of showing gratitude to those who helped me. It's why I am so deeply invested in my students as human beings. I want them to succeed and walk away from my classes knowing they are capable.