

Teaching Statement for David A. Spitzley

My formal teaching experience, while limited, is rather intensive. In the 2002-03 school year, I was privileged to receive a Graduate Teaching Assistantship position at Wayne State University, teaching one section of undergraduate microeconomics each semester. The circumstances were a bit more challenging than that description might convey, however. First, I was working full-time at the time (as I have for my entire time in the PhD program). Second, I was teaching an evening section at an off-campus center, which by departmental practice meant that I was responsible for all aspects of the course (course plan, testing, and grading), rather than simply teaching discussion sections for lectures given by a member of the faculty. Third, I only received one week's notice before the school year began (I was brought in to fill a vacancy), and was thus usually developing each session's course plan the weekend before, all while working a 40-hour week, completing my own coursework, serving as a national representative for the Green Party of Michigan, and somehow maintaining domestic harmony at home.

I found the entire experience extremely rewarding, if exhausting. Some of this was my own doing, because I decided to take more labor-intensive approaches when I thought it would benefit the students. For example, I chose not to use the multiple choice tests that were typical for our undergraduate sections, instead writing a series of weekly quizzes containing short answer and problem solving questions. As a result, I spent several hours each weekend hand-scoring exams, but I think my students benefited from the more detailed feedback that this allowed me to give: scores on the midterms and finals were consistently higher than the quizzes covering the same material.

By the second semester, I had definitely refined the process quite a bit, but both semesters the students appear to have responded favorably to the way I constructed the course. With the

exception of midterms, the basic setup was the same each class: the session would begin with a quiz on the chapter covered in the previous section's lecture. This was then followed by a lecture on the chapter students had been assigned to read for the week. During the lecture I would generally answer multiple questions asked by the students, who were encouraged to do so by a small percentage of the final grade based upon classroom participation; I think it worked, as most students were contributing substantially to classroom discussions by the end of each semester. At that point we'd break (these were four hour sessions running until 10 pm, so a bit of movement was necessary to forestall snoring), and after the break one student would present an article from the popular press dealing with some sort of microeconomic issue. The grading scheme was set up to encourage the student to draw explicit links between their article and the topics we were studying, and to bring up unanswered questions; the discussions of those articles were frequently very spirited, and were cited by many students as their favorite part of the class because they gave the theory we were studying real world context. Finally, we'd end the session by going over the problem set assigned for the current chapter, which generally mapped strongly onto the types of problems to be asked on the quiz.

My proudest moment as a teacher was probably giving one of my students in the fall term a final grade of C+. He was a slightly older student, probably in his mid-twenties, who was active in youth mentoring, and hoping to someday own his own business. We met at every single one of my office hours to go over the handouts, run through the math, and discuss the textbook. There were times when he was considering dropping the class because he was afraid he couldn't pass; at one point I actually wrote a letter to his wife when he received a failing grade on a quiz, explaining that it was poorly designed and had flattened half the class (one of the dangers of taking an instructor's first attempt at a course). But we kept working every week, and he found he

was able to master the conceptual portions even when he ran into problems with the math. It was the hardest-won C+ I've ever seen, and I'll always be proud of him for sticking with it. I suppose the hardest part for me is not knowing whether I made a difference to my students in the long run.

In the end, I believe I was a very effective instructor, and the students seemed to agree. As you can see on the attached Course Survey Summary forms, I received a 3.9 out of 5 on the core teacher evaluation scores in the fall section, and boosted it to a 4.2 out of 5 in the winter term, even though initial student interest in the class was lower than in the fall. I also received written comments from more than half of the students in each section, which I suspect is pretty unusual; I can make them available on request. Here are a few choice entries (*sic* throughout):

- "You are one of the best teachers I've had at WSU. Everything was clearly presented & regular testing made things easy to remember. I would recommend you to anyone taking classes, no matter what you were teaching!"
- "I enjoyed David Spitzley for an instructor - he was well organized, and he made himself very available to us. Economics is not the most fun subject to study, however he kept our attention focused and I enjoyed this class. I would recommend him as an instructor to anyone."
- "I found the instructor to be great. I took the class without realizing that I could have taken the same course ten minutes away from home. I didn't change because of the instructor."
- "The course was very well done. You were available and willing to answer any questions and I actually learned some interesting stuff."
- "Very encouraging - always made me want to try harder, and actually sparked our interest in the topic. I was very leery about taking this course but now I have no more fear of economics. Very very great job!!"
- "Was difficult because I'm not confident with my math skills - but learned a great deal in an area I was not familiar with."
- "He should have given me a A, but I still like him." (Oh, well, can't please everybody...)

I could go on with more details, such as my approach to grading and my view of the importance of active student involvement, but ultimately I think the key point I want to make is that I really want my students to learn, and consider it my responsibility to both make it possible for them to do so, and ensure that they know it is possible.