

# Teaching Statement

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## Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy is built around four pillars. It begins with the philosophy that the students, and not the instructor, constitute the centerpiece of the classroom.

Paradoxically, however, to focus on the students requires concerted effort from the instructor, in order not to fall into patterns of self-centered teaching. As a guide and a teacher, I lead classes by inducing contributions and reactions from students that lead to learning. To do this effectively, so that students are actively learning and “doing”, I must, above all else, set my teaching to the level of my students. It is common in the courses I have taught that students have different backgrounds, prior experiences, and needs. My experience tells me that even students in different sections of the same class engage with the material in different atmospheres. Therefore, to teach in a manner appropriate to each group and to allow each to emerge as the centerpiece of the classroom, I must know the students well. Every class is a unique experience to both the students and the instructor.

The second pillar of my teaching philosophy is that students can and should be encouraged to exercise rigorous logic and evidence-based thinking on their own. To do that, I have tried to help students develop their logical progressions and critical thinking skills with challenging, constructive feedback on their papers and assignments, follow-up questions during discussions, and probing responses to their own questions.

Third, I believe that good mentoring is critical to good teaching. In addition to the benefits of learning in group settings, one-on-one tutoring can make the difference between a student just grasping a new concept and one who takes that concept in new and exciting directions. I thus implore students to take advantage of office hours and regular email contact with me to engage in substantive exchanges, and many take me up on this; I view it as a practical alternative to very small classes. In addition to working through content, I try to offer advice and career help where appropriate, and I often find myself listening to concerns I would not have anticipated. I am quite proud to note that I have worked closely with students who have gone on to Ph.D. programs at Stanford, NYU, Rice, American University, and others.

The fourth pillar of my teaching philosophy is that teaching requires constant learning. This means prioritizing several attributes. First, teachers must adopt an attitude of open-mindedness. Updating knowledge is important, and I do not believe that instructors must convey that they know all the answers. To demonstrate an attitude of open-mindedness, an instructor may fairly say “I don’t know – let’s get to the bottom of that.” I believe that this honest attitude can also contribute to the construction of trust between the instructor and students, which can help reinforce the students’ learning process.

Constant learning also means conveying passion. Looking back to the days when I was a student, passion from teachers was infectious, and we were all excited to learn along with those instructors. Personally, my passion comes in finding the links between substance and methodology. For example, when I encountered advanced mathematical concepts such as rigorously defined probability and conditional expectations using Lebesgue's integral at the outset of my Ph.D. studies, I was motivated to study functional analysis on my own, reading texts and taking internet courses on set theory, topology, real analysis, functional analysis, etc. It energizes me to find the intuition behind the mathematical concepts and definitions because without it, mathematics is simply the mechanical relationship between symbols. Those intuitions are the basis for applying the mathematical concepts to the substantive study of politics, whether in formal modeling or empirical studies.

Finally, constant learning means updating teaching materials and the structure of courses. I make a point to update my teaching material regularly, and I have experimented with teaching my courses in different formats. In fact, as I note below, in light of last semester's teaching experience, I am in the process of testing a new teaching format even now.

## **Teaching Experience**

My teaching experience as a Ph.D. student started as a teaching assistant (TA) in International Relations for an MA-level course. It also includes International Development (MA), Quant I/Quant II (MA), and International Politics (undergraduate) either as a TA, a CA or a Preceptor.<sup>1</sup> I was able to begin as a TA for the MA program because, having graduated from the program myself, I had a strong relationship with the program's faculty, especially with the director of the program at that time, Shinasi Rama. He thought I would be a good fit to teach and guide the MA students as I entered the Ph.D. program. Below, I provide an overview of the courses I have taught.

**International Relations (Graduate MA):** While Shinasi Rama taught theories that take an historical approach such as realism, neo realism, liberalism, neo liberalism, and constructivism, he asked me to teach a more scientific approach theory – the selectorate theory. As students sought guidance not only about selectorate theory but also about the traditional theories and associated assignments, the TA for this course had to have a strong grasp of both the historical and scientific approaches. Teaching selectorate theory was challenging because most of the students had no background knowledge in scientific approaches. I thus used lectures, paper comments, office hours, and emails to help them understand the logic of the theory. I also updated my lecture notes immediately after each teaching session, and tried to elicit feed-back whenever I could.

**International Development (Graduate MA):** I worked as a course assistant for this course, which included students from various backgrounds such as a public official from Singapore, a veteran, and international students from many countries with different

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<sup>1</sup> Course Assistants hold office hours and grade. A preceptor is the same as a TA except that preceptors have only one session while TAs hold two sessions per week.

cultural backgrounds. In preparation for their research papers, I made appointments early with every student and continued those meetings throughout the semester. Due to their diverse backgrounds, the course worked best by allowing students to develop their own research topics and then to provide guidance in how they might structure the papers and apply broader concepts from the course in a meaningful way. In particular, I aimed to teach the intuitions of causal inference and to help students apply that approach in their own papers.

Quant I/Quant II (Graduate MA): As a preceptor, I taught the applied use of STATA for students doing statistical analysis in their own research. The lectures included STATA codes for actual research, the interpretation of regression tables, the meaning of statistical terms, interpretations of interaction terms, issues of multicollinearity, etc. I always aimed to create a comfortable environment for students to extend their analytical capacity by giving them positive feedback.

International Politics (Undergraduate): I was a teaching assistant for the undergraduate international politics courses taught by Shanker Satyanath and Jennifer Larson. I had a couple of opportunities to lead sessions for undergraduate courses when I was a graduate student in Korea (MA), but this was my first time to lead a section comprised mostly of freshmen. Therefore, I had to undergo a process of learning by trial and error.

1. Shanker Satyanath: This is a basic game theory course applied to international relations. The smaller sections thus focused on formal logic, basic concepts, and solutions in game theory. Since freshmen of various backgrounds made up most of the class, many concepts were entirely new to them. I used plain language and created a safe environment by encouraging them whenever they got outside of their intellectual comfort zones. To learn formal logic and the concepts of game theory, students must take risks. Trial-and-error is necessary. However, I also found some opportunities to improve my teaching. So, in the current semester, I am trying a variant of the flipped classroom. Conceptually, the flipped classroom is a student-led form of education in which students prepare for their next meeting by watching the instructor's video lecture or otherwise having access to the "teaching content". They can then use class time to solve problems given by the instructor. Students teach each other and discuss how to solve the problems, and instructors involve themselves only when students request it. Even then, the instructor's role is limited to giving hints and explaining the concepts. In Shanker's course, Shanker explains the concepts and shows how to solve problems in lecture. I treat this as similar to students watching a video lecture prior to meeting. Therefore, in section, I may give a brief introductory lecture with Q&A, then provide a couple of problems to students (20-30 min), and finally give them the solutions and the opportunity to review their own solutions (10-15min). Furthermore, since students can ask me exactly what they cannot understand, I can offer them 1:1 tutoring-kind opportunities. In this way, I am able to offer four different types of teaching to students: lecture, solving problems on their own, teaching each other, and tutoring.

2. Jennifer Larson: Unlike Shanker's course, Larson's was a substantive-oriented course. Therefore, the TA is required to explain various substantive concepts across subfields of international relations such as security, political economy, environment, international regimes, international laws, etc. Students were required to watch movies and answer analytical questions about the movies or to pick up recent international news articles and analyze the news using the concepts they learned in class. Interestingly, I found that developing skills in substantive logic was perhaps more difficult for students than the formal logic, because substantive logic is constructed in a complicated language. Students sometimes misinterpret the logic or apply it in the wrong way. As a result, my comments and their replies to my comments served as a primary teaching tool to develop their way of thinking.

## Potential Courses

International Politics (Core): Ph.D/MA/Undergraduate

Alliance Politics : Ph.D/MA/Undergraduate

Selectorate Theory : Ph.D/MA/Undergraduate

Introduction to Quantitative Analysis : Undergraduate

Quant I : Ph.D (MA Quant I & II combined is almost equivalent to Ph.D quant I)

Quant II: Ph.D

Quantitative Analysis in International Relations : Ph.D

Research Design: Ph.D/MA

Causal Inference : Ph.D/MA

Game Theory I : Ph.D/MA

Math for Political Scientist I : This course included basic set theory, basic real analysis, basic optimization theory, basic multivariate calculus, basic probability theory, basic fixed point theorem.

Math for Political Scientist II : This course included basic topology, basic correspondence (upper/lower hemi-continuous, maximum theorem, etc.), basic functional analysis (mainly on Lebesgue integral), a proof, and intuition of the conditional expectation. I would like to briefly expand on my view for this proposed course. Nowadays, even within the scientific approach to political science in academia, stratifications among scholars by level of knowledge (or ability) in mathematics are common. These stratifications may lead to divides in academia, impeding communication among scholars and causing unnecessary conflicts and misunderstanding. The challenge is that instructors' level of knowledge in mathematics is largely determined not by their Ph.D. education, but by their backgrounds before entering the Ph.D. program. I view this as a significant failure of political science Ph.D. programs. In this context, "Math for Political Scientists I" tends to become inappropriately superficial, while students with strong backgrounds in mathematics tend to skip the course and take econ Ph.D. mathematics. I thus view intermediate math (Math II) as an especially useful intermediate course for positive political science; it not only meets the needs of students who will consume and produce methods papers, but it also promotes communication within the field in the long run and better prepares those students who wish to specialize in formal

modeling or methodology, or continue with econ Ph.D. mathematics. I am thus developing plans to teach an intermediate Math II course of this sort, using my approach of placing the students at the center, encouraging the development of rigorous skills, mentoring, and constantly learning myself.

### **Teaching evaluations (selected)**

“Professor is sometimes unclear, but (Sukwon) clearly cares about subject material and wants you to understand. Approachable, answers.”

“This is very bright. He certainly understands his subject.”

“He responded to all the emails and explained in depth what covered in lectures.”

“He is very open to questions and very patient.”

“He knows what he was talking about and he was extremely helpful.”

“Sukwon Lee is an excellent TA! He was always well-prepared for the recitation section. It is clear that he has put tremendous effort into preparing for the recitation classes. Well done!”

“Very prompt responses to questions”

“Learned more in recitation than lecture.”

“(Sukwon) has a distinct passion in the subject.”

“Sukwon is nice, approachable and knows the theory very well and great at emails!”

“He is good at explaining hard concepts. And I can feel his passion for this course.”

“Very approachable, very nice and patient with my questions.”

“Overall I found it useful”

“He was really clear in everything he was saying. He was repeating all the complex details many times so that we could fully understand.”

“He encouraged us to participate and speak.”

“super responsible. easy to understand. very efficient. nice personality. gives clear feedback.”

“Sukwon was very to the point and effective during recitations, he explained materials quickly and succinctly in a way everyone could understand.”

“He was always willing to provide time to meet up.”