

BENJAMIN J. HARRELL

LGBTQ+ Policy Lab | Department of Economics, Vanderbilt University

TEACHING STATEMENT & EVIDENCE OF TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

Having now served as instructor of record for five courses at two very different institutions, I have come to think of learning as a journey, with the student as traveler and educators as guide. Now, it might be fair to oversimplify in this way to capture the big picture of the learning process, but in practice, the path from novice to expert is rarely linear, and the terrain that comprises that path is rarely smooth. Most importantly, there are *many* paths to that destination. The challenge of the teacher-scholar, then, is to balance the structure necessary to guide the student to their destination while also affirming the student's agency in choosing their path. This kind of teaching is achieved through three broad strategies—the Three Es: encouraging, equipping, and empowering. Students achieve mastery of material when they are both affectively and cognitively engaged with it, when they have the right tools for the job, and when they are given opportunities to connect concepts in creative ways.

Encouraging students might seem like a vague concept at first, but one of the fundamental structures of learning is positive reinforcement. During my time at Georgia State, I found that affirming both student effort and accomplishment was useful in attending to the needs of my principles of economics students, many of whom (GSU was a majority-minority university) were racial or ethnic minorities and first-generation students. Many of them (informal in-class polls using phone-based polling apps indicated nearly 50% in introductory courses) had never taken an economics course before. To help in building mental models of success, I deployed Metacognition Post-assessments (Tanner 2012) in which I gave students opportunities to earn back a portion of points lost on the first assignments (the toughest for new students) by critically evaluating where they went wrong and correcting mistakes. However, teaching two courses (hybrid Principles and virtual Game Theory) during the COVID-19 pandemic taught me that sometimes the best encouragement is the most straightforward. In addition to leaning far more on humor as a pedagogical tool, I independently reached out to students more to check in, I pulled on information they disclosed in discussion board assignments (e.g. favorite foods or video games) to facilitate connections that they would have made with me during in-person classes. Many students used personal lines of communication to share harrowing stories of their own personal circumstances during the pandemic, and I encouraged their efforts to remain engaged with the course. Encouragement took on a very different form during my time teaching Intermediate Microeconomics at Vanderbilt University. These students, among some of the highest achieving in the nation, rarely needed their effort encouraged, but rather their curiosity. The course was sufficiently small for me to gain insight into students' individual interests, concurrent with which I shared books, journal articles, and media to facilitate student exploration of economics topics they found interesting.

Equipping students is not always as straightforward as encouraging. I provide my students (especially introductory level) with thoughtfully curated media: TikTok and YouTube videos, podcasts, as well as news articles and Twitter or Reddit threads. These help students connect what they learn in class to real-world events. For upper-level students, I engage them directly in current scholarship. One tool I use to do this is the jigsaw literature review (Aronson, 1978), which I introduce with my coauthors

in [our article](#) in the *Journal of Economic Education*. The jigsaw literature review puts research with opposing viewpoints (particularly on contemporary and controversial topics) directly into the hands of students, and then has them teach *each other* the content of these papers, and then synthesize their own conclusions from these readings. This tool is useful in accomplishing the goal of exposing students to policy-relevant readings about topics such as race, inequality, sexuality, and discrimination as recommended by The Committee for the Status of Minority Groups in the Economics Profession (CSMGEP, 2020). For upper-level courses, where appropriate, I also conduct a day where I introduce students to basic economic data from a variety of sources: FRED, BLS, IPUMS, showing them the tools to answer their own questions about the real-world economy. In introductory courses, I often offer an extra credit assignment in which students may choose from a rotating pool of economics journal articles (many of which are cited in the JEE article above), summarize the article's key findings and implications, and apply the findings of that article to a current or historical event.

Finally, **empowering** students is the delicate art of setting them up to succeed. I believe that curating moments and tasks in which students can prove their mastery to *themselves* as well as intra/extramurally. Empowerment is all about making the student into the teacher—it is the final step in the journey from not knowing to expertise. The simplest method for empowerment is one of the most counterintuitive: classroom discussion. In-class discussion provides with carefully curated questions with multiple “correct” answers can set students up to succeed. I employ the practice of “cold-calling” my students, or calling on a student whose hand is not raised to answer a question. This active-learning strategy has been shown (Dallimore, Hertenstein, and Blatt, 2022) to improve voluntary participation, improve learning, and critically, increase voluntary participation by women, which can help close the gendered gap in participation. However, since I am conscious of criticisms of this method, another way I empower students is by giving them agency over their classroom: I utilize Group Instructional Feedback Techniques (GIFTs) twice during the semester to allow for course-correction across learning environments as students require it. Finally, empowering students happens through mentorship. At GSU, I had the great privilege to mentor 4 of my students in furthering their education in graduate school, 3 of whom were women, all of whom were racial or ethnic minorities. One of these students was accepted at the prestigious American Economic Association Summer Pre-Doctoral program and has since been accepted at a top 40 economics PhD program. Additionally, in my time at the LGBT Policy Lab at Vanderbilt, I mentored a diverse group of undergraduate research assistants as well as PhD students in research methods, professional development in the economics profession, and in how they might be better instructors.

Teaching is nothing without student engagement. By carefully deploying the three E's, I accomplish two tasks: I hold myself accountable to my own concept of teaching while also ensuring that I proceed in a systematic and measurable way. This makes teaching and learning a truly two-sided process evaluation where each student's success is a function of both their effort and mine. In this way, I preserve student agency while maintaining high pedagogical standards. Consequently, my students frequently outperformed their peers on the Test of Understanding in College Economics (TUCE) at GSU, and my teaching evaluations, while not the ideal measure of effectiveness because of their gendered and racialized outcomes (Chavez and Mitchell, 2019), and both at Vanderbilt and GSU, my evaluations were rated above department averages.

Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness

Below is an overall summary of my teaching experience and evaluations. Detailed evaluation breakdowns follow.

Course	Role	School	Semester	Overall Rating	Dept Average
Macroeconomic Theory I (Master's Level)	Teaching Assistant	Georgia State University (graduate school)	Fall 2017	N/A*	N/A
Principles of Microeconomics	Teaching Assistant	Georgia State University	Spring 2018	N/A*	N/A
Principles of Microeconomics	Instructor of Record	Georgia State University	Spring 2019	4.72/5	4.4
Intermediate Microeconomics	Instructor of Record	Georgia State University	Fall 2019	4.74/5	4.3
Principles of Microeconomics (Hybrid)	Instructor of Record	Georgia State University	Spring 2020	N/A ¹	N/A
Introduction to Game Theory (Virtual)	Instructor of Record	Georgia State University	Summer 2020	4.8/5	3.9
Intermediate Microeconomics	Instructor of Record	Vanderbilt University	Summer 2022	4.8/5	4.65

Notes:

*: Teaching assistants not rated

¹: Evaluations not collected due to COVID-19

Reported rank from "My overall assessment of this course..." measured on 1-5 scale. Raw data available below.

Georgia State University Courses: Student Evaluation of Instructor Detail (5=Strongly agree...1=Strongly disagree)	Principles of Microeconomics, Spring 2019	Intermediate Microeconomics, Fall 2019	Intro to Game Theory, Summer 2020
I attended class in accordance with the instructor's policies	4.6	4.7	4.4
I asked the instructor questions when I found course information unclear	4.8	4.5	4.4
I actively worked to engage with ideas that I had not considered before	4.5	4.6	4.6
I achieved the course objectives outlined by the instructor	4.7	4.7	4.7
The instructor followed the plan for the course as it was outlined in the syllabus	4.7	4.7	4.7
The instructor was clear and fair about the grading system in the class	4.7	4.7	4.8
The instructor was well-prepared	4.6	4.8	4.6
The instructor communicated effectively	4.5	4.9	4.7
The instructor was accessible to all students	4.7	4.8	4.7
The instructor created an environment that helped students learn	4.4	4.8	4.8
The feedback I received from the instructor helped my learning	4.5	4.8	4.6
The course increased my ability to critically evaluate ideas	4.6	4.7	4.7
The content of this course was organized in a way that ensured I learned the material	4.5	4.7	4.8
I discussed topics from this class with others outside the classroom	4.6	4.7	4.6
This course challenged me to think	4.5	4.5	4.7
The content of the exams and other evaluations were consistent with the material presented	4.5	4.7	4.5
My overall assessment of this course is	4.7	4.7	4.8

Vanderbilt University Course: Student Evaluation of Instructor Detail (5=Strongly agree...1=Strongly disagree)	Intermediate Microeconomics, Summer 2022
The instructor helped me understand the core ideas and issues in this subject.	5
The instructor explained what was expected of me in the assignments and assessments for this course	5
The instructor encouraged critical, original, or creative thinking.	5
The instructor demonstrated interest in students' learning.	5
The instructor used class time productively.	4.2
The instructor created a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment.	5
This course helped me appreciate the significance of the subject matter.	5
The components of the course, such as class activities, assessments, and assignments, were consistent with the course goals.	5
The feedback I received during the course was helpful.	5
I felt comfortable asking questions in this course.	4.4
This course helped me consider connections between course material and other areas of my personal, academic, or professional life.	5
Compared to other classes, the amount I learned in this course was:	4.6
Compared to requirements in other classes, the workload assigned in this class was:	4.1
Overall, the instructor (Benjamin Harrell) was:	4.8