Econ 593x

Practicum in Teaching the Liberal Arts (TA Training in Economics)

Fall 2015

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Office: KAP 318C, Office Hours Mon 2:00-5PM, Tues: 2-3PM,

Class Time and Place: Monday 5:00—6:45PM in KAP335

This course is designed to help new teaching assistants with the following tasks: (1) to communicate effectively with their students, (2) to draw up effective lesson plans, (3) to become familiar with the pros and cons of different approaches to teaching, (4) to teach at a level appropriate for USC undergraduate students, (5) to organize TA sections in ways designed to reinforce key ideas and methods that the professor whom you are assisting is trying to communicate, (6) to display the kind of responsiveness to student queries and problems that may be expected, (7) to get practice in introducing students both to (a) a particular set of concepts in the class you are either teaching now or would be in the first semester as TA and to (b) the kind of pioneering breakthrough that has led to a particular Nobel Prize award in economics (of your own choosing).

To that end, each student will be required to prepare at least three short presentations of 20-30 minutes each, identified as follows:

(1) Presenting relevant material for a TA session early in the semester for the course in which the student is serving as TA or would be likely to in the first semester

(2) Presenting relevant material for a TA session late in the semester for the course in which they are likely to serve as TA

(3) Explain in an understandable way for undergrads the basic ideas, insights of a Nobel prize winner in Economics, perhaps explaining why the work was deemed so innovative and its usefulness and applications.

In each class (after the first) we will have two or three students present

Grading: The class is graded either “Pass” or “No Pass”

Attendance: Because of the importance of getting each teaching assistant to be effective before the end of the first semester as TA, it is expected that each student attend every class and be prepared for at least three presentations during the semester. We will also have intervention visits by successful TAs and by student advisors

The courses that you are assisting in are perhaps the most important ones for getting students into good study habits, becoming able to appreciate the usefulness of the concepts and tools to which they
are introduced, making them feel comfortable in applying them to different problems, and hopefully developing a passion for the subject that will carry them throughout the major and/or prepare them to draw on economics in other courses. Given the country’s need for increasing the academic achievements of minority students and USC’s reputation for encouraging minority students to achieve and compete effectively, each TA should be on the lookout for minority students and to guide them to people who may be able to offer them special help if needed. Accomplishing all these objectives in a single semester is very important but also very challenging.

Specific Issues to be touched upon:

Grading:

Objective, willingness to spend time with student explaining the rationale of the grading, coordination with the professor you are assisting on the standards, means of communicating with students. You should plan your schedules so that you will be able to coordinate with your professor. The standards should be similar across different sections of the same course.

Effective communication with students:

To that end, you should hold at least 4 office hours per week, preferably some of them on two different days. Notification, always be present at the designated time, be willing to meet with students outside of office hours, especially before exams.

Effective Coordination with your supervising professor:

To that end, you must attend the lectures of the professor in the class you are assisting.

Schedule of Classes and Topics

Week 1: General Guidelines for Success as a TA

Reports from Our Faculty to Me on Problems they have had with TAs and what they expect of them

Effective communication and coordination with the faculty member you are assisting. You are required by Dornsife College rules to attend all lectures by the faculty members and naturally you should encourage your faculty supervisor to visit your section or review session if at all possible to ensure coordination, cooperation and to get his/her advice. Keep that faculty member informed about what you plan to cover and about any problems you might be having with an individual student.

Week 2: Drawing on Existing Literature

It is important to make use of existing literature on teaching wherever relevant. In the reference items identified at the bottom of the syllabus are twelve such books or papers that are relevant to different dimensions of teaching. In this week, each student should examine one item (on this list or another you of your choice) and report on it to the class. You will note a wide variety of orientations presented and
issues treated. Some are aimed direct at a TA in an undergraduate institution like USC. Others are dedicated to making optimal use of the Blackboard or on-line.

**Weeks 3-6: Practice in Presenting your first important lessons in Economics in the discussion section of the course in which you are assisting**

Each student should prepare a 20 minute, well-prepared presentation aimed at the level and subject matter of the Economics course you are insisting in. On each of these weeks we will begin with a presentation by a guest offering their own perspective on what is needed to become an outstanding TA and avoid complaints registered to the advisors and the professors. Students in the class are also encouraged to offer critiques of the student presenters.

**Week 3:** The first guest is one TA who has won the Outstanding Teaching Assistant awards. The guest offers guidance on how they have become successful as a TA in Economics and subsequently along with the instructor offer critiques of the student presentations. Emphasis in the critiques this week is on clarity of speaking, organization and ability to present without notes.

**Week 4:** The second guest is another outstanding TA in Economics. The guest offers guidance on how they have become successful as a TA in Economics and subsequently along with the instructor offers critiques of the student presentations. Emphasis in the critiques this week is on the appropriateness of the level, and encouraging student involvement by asking them questions.

**Week 5:** The guest this time is an undergraduate advisor in Economics who identifies common complaints that advisors receive about courses and especially TAs. The guest and the instructor lead the class in identifying teaching strategies to avoid having such complaints and to join the ranks of the Outstanding TAs in Economics. Once again the main class time is devoted to each of the 20 minute presentations by TA and their collective critique. Emphasis in the critiques this week will be on the advice given by the two outstanding TAs in the previous classes.

**Week 6:** The guest is again another undergraduate advisor in Economics who identifies common complaints that advisors receive about courses and especially TAs. The guest and the instructor lead the class in identifying teaching strategies to avoid having such complaints and to join the ranks of the Outstanding TAs in Economics. Once again the main class time is devoted to each of the 20 minute presentations of an Economics lesson by TA and their collective critique. Emphasis in this week is on stimulation of interest in the presentation.

**Weeks 7-11 Practice in Presenting More Advanced Economics Material in a Way that can be Understood by Freshmen and Sophomore Undergraduates**

Each student should prepare a 20-25 minute presentation of the major contribution of a Nobel Prize winner in Economics of their choice in a way that is understandable to undergraduates and serves the purpose of demonstrating the usefulness of economics to tackle new topics, challenge conventional viewpoints and approaches so as to excite undergrad students to want to go further in their study of Economics.
Week 7: During each week, we will also collectively discuss problems that TAs in this class are having in dealing with students. This will also lead us to the relevant references cited below.

Chief among these is expected to be attendance problems of students, no shows for appointments, how to encourage students who are having problems in the class, how to deal with students who talk or disrupt in class, how to maintain attention of all students, complaints about grading, encouraging students to be efficient in their note-taking, managing use of Blackboard.

Week 8: Again 2-3 more student presentations of the contributions by a Nobel Prize winner in Economics. Again also discussion of problems encountered with students or coordinating with professors. As in each subsequent week after week 7 we discuss experience TAS in Economics have had in trying to make use of the advice suggested for dealing with the problems in preceding weeks. Has the advice helped? If not, why not?

Week 9: Again 2-3 more student presentations of the contributions by a Nobel Prize winner in Economics. Again discussion of problems encountered with students or coordinating with professors. As in each subsequent week after week 7 we discuss experience TAS in Economics have had in trying to make use of the advice suggested for dealing with the problems in preceding weeks. Has the advice helped? If not, why not?

Week 10: Again 2-3 more student presentations of the contributions by a Nobel Prize winner in Economics. Again also discussion of problems encountered with students or coordinating with professors. As in each subsequent week after week 7 we discuss experience TAS in Economics have had in trying to make use of the advice suggested for dealing with the problems in preceding weeks. Has the advice helped? If not, why not?

Week 11: Final 20-15 minute presentations by students of Nobel Prize winners in Economics and in this case drawing on other literature in Teaching Economics.

Weeks 12-15 Practice in Presenting in an understandable way, the kind of research that you are already doing or would like to do in the near future.

Weeks 12-14. While much of the earlier material should be present on ordinary black or white boards, this last would be shorter could be presented with Powerpoint, but then each presenter should be aware of the possible mis- or over-use of powerpoint as pointed out in the references for this class.

Week 15: Last Class Final discussion of all problems encountered and each student’s explanation of what he/she did about it and its effectiveness. What phases of teaching Economics do you still feel is challenging to you and why? What do you feel can be done? What have you learned about teaching Economics? How does this differ from what is said in the Key

Advice The courses that you are assisting in are perhaps the most important ones for getting students into good study habits, becoming able to appreciate the usefulness of the concepts and tools
to which they are introduced, making them feel comfortable in applying them to different problems, and hopefully developing a passion for Economics that will carry them throughout the major and/or prepare them to draw on Economics in other courses. Given the country’s need for increasing the academic achievements of minority students and USC’s reputation for encouraging minority students to achieve and compete effectively, each TA should be on the lookout for minority students and to guide them to people who may be able to offer them special help if needed. Accomplishing all these objectives in a single semester is very important but also very challenging.

**Grading:** Objective, giving helpful comments, raising questions, showing the student where further explanation is needed, willingness to spend time with student explaining the rationale of the grading, coordination with the professor you are assisting on the standards, and outing emphasis on the issues that are central to the course and what the professor is trying to get students to be able to do. You should plan your schedules so that you will be able to grade the quizzes and exams in a timely manner. Needless to say, for fairness to the students, it is also important that grading is done in a way that is the same across TAs/graders in any given course. With the professor’s approval it can be a useful incentive to offer bonuses for improvement over time.

**Office hours:** Notification, always being present at the designated time, being willing to meet with students outside of office hours, especially before exams.

**Pronunciation and speaking:** Especially since most of you are international students, it is important to make sure that you are well understood. To avoid misunderstanding when there is any doubt, repeat yourself, speak slowly, use blackboard and ask students repeatedly if they understand. Use standard English language terms unless clearly specified to the contrary, like Greek letters for certain parameters.

**Effective communication with students:** Return emails promptly. Make sure that you never miss a meeting that you have made with an individual or group of students.

**Importance of Anticipation.** A good TA is always ahead of the class. Put next assignments on Blackboard. Also practice exams to be put up, Organize your own review session for each exam.

**Teaching Philosophy and Methods.** What professors and teaching assistants have you had that most inspired you? How did they do it? Please always be prepared for class with a clear plan in mind and perhaps alert the students at the beginning of any session what the purpose of that class/review session etc. is. Especially since different students are used to learn in different ways, be prepared to try different ways to get across most important points and make sure that students understand them and can apply them. For example, it is often helpful to get every student ready to come to the board to show that they can do what you have done or apply that to a different situation or problem. Emphasize applications of the subject matter and the tools being introduced to the real world, so that students, whether Economics majors or not, can appreciate the relevance of Economics to life, the world and the solution of its problems.

**Beyond this course, transition to teaching your own Economics course.** Transition in your final year to presenting you job market paper in seeking your first academic employment. Develop the habit of
effective presentation in our informal and formal specialized seminars and in professional conferences.

**Key Reference Materials**


5. Annenberg/CPB The Economics Classroom 2002 Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (a prep aimed at teachers of Advanced Placement Courses I High school/ good for transition to undergrad courses in economics).


8. Kerns, Barbara et al Bradley University. 2008 Ten Principles of Effective Teaching and Practical Examples for the Classroom and Online. This short guide is very useful for helping guide TAs and professors in the use of Blackboard at USC and on-line materials. TAs are requested to use this to come up with ideas about how to make use of Blackboard and online materials in an optimal way.


