

Teaching Portfolio

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This document includes my teaching philosophy, a summary of my teaching experience, representative teaching evaluations, and links to previous course syllabi.

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I. Teaching Statement

In my time as a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, I have been the teaching assistant or primary instructor for five economics courses, including microeconomics and macroeconomics courses, and at the intermediate level in macroeconomics. I have also taught special topics courses in which I was responsible for developing the curriculum.

When I began teaching at UMass, I had little experience in front of a classroom. I quickly learned there was no better test of your knowledge of a concept than teaching it to others. Teaching complex economics concepts clearly, coherently, and concisely is a continuous challenge that requires constant improvement. It was clear from student feedback that I was, at times, less than enthusiastic, soft-spoken, and appeared less than prepared. However, I mastered the material with time and repetition and developed my own teaching lessons and examples. Graduate courses expanded my expertise. And my confidence grew, and, with it, my enthusiasm.

I found the best ways to break down the material with simple examples through trial and error. In my experience, there is no substitute for practice. Providing students with a variety of examples and practice problems is critical. Many students struggle with the use of mathematical models used in economic theory. Although most students have the requisite algebra training from high school,

transitioning to using linear equations to describe behavioral phenomena can initially be jarring. In macro courses, for example, I find it helpful to take the extra time to review basic algebra concepts first, using familiar symbols and notation they learned in high school before setting up the first model using the conventional notation in economics. I noticed this simple step helped numerous students avoid falling behind early on.

I am proud of my progression as a teacher and excited by the prospect of continuing to share knowledge and develop students' understanding of economics. Of course, there is always room for refinement. I regard student feedback as the most critical to improving the learning experience and my effectiveness as an educator. For example, in my "debt economics" course, I received enthusiastic reviews for the originality of the material and assignments and for incorporating podcasts that can help students digest ideas and debates beyond the readings; I also received constructive feedback about incorporating more class discussion mechanisms or prompts, which I wholeheartedly agreed with.

I-A. Creating a diverse, inclusive, and supportive environment

Students come from a myriad of backgrounds and have unique experiences, which can bring diverse perspectives and ideas to the classroom. Fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment where students feel comfortable expressing their views and perspectives and contributing to class discussion and understanding is the challenge. One must also acknowledge that students enter the course with differing competencies and learning styles.

My general approach to fostering an inclusive environment includes the following:

- (i) Provide opportunities for students to share their perspectives with each other; this entails students participating in class discussions or open forums to engage economic concepts and policy debate—ensuring they do so constructively and respectfully. I find requiring responses through online forums or writing response papers on the curriculum helps prime students for engagement in class discussion. Group projects and presentations also enable them to exchange ideas with their peers and create bonds that may last long beyond the classroom. In this way, the classroom is not only a place to come and go but an environment that promotes effort and enthusiasm.
- (ii) Accounting for different learning styles and additional opportunities to absorb economic concepts and alternative points of view. I strive to achieve this by incorporating, as much as possible, alternative learning materials beyond assigned textbook readings, including videos, audiobooks, podcasts, and opinion articles that overlap the material. I have received positive feedback from students about integrating podcasts (e.g., *Odd Lots*, *Slate Money*, *Macro Musings*), an increasingly popular medium to expose students to in-depth policy discussions and debates.

I find getting to know students, learning their interests, and encouraging participation essential. I also frequently provide out of lecture review sessions before exams so that students have another

opportunity to ask questions and receive help with concepts they are struggling with; one of the most frequent pieces of feedback I get is how much these sessions helped students.

I-B. Using active learning techniques

Learning by doing is a key principle in my teaching approach. In my experience, students have found a lot of value in assignments that go beyond theoretical models and textbook economic math problems. I endeavor to teach them basic statistical techniques required to conduct economic analysis using real-world data (e.g., replicating various time series, estimating the Phillips curve); this includes where to get it and how to access it so they have the tools to do economic analysis beyond the course.

My preferred evaluation method is a semester-end research project that requires students to put the skills they have learned in the class into practice. For example, in my “debt economics” course, students were provided the tools of analysis—and where to find data—on debt using a sectoral approach, i.e., examining households, firms, and government debt. Then, they were required to form groups to conduct a sectoral debt analysis of a country of interest and present their findings to the class as their final exam.

Keeping the course topical with current economic and policy debates from the news to keep students more engaged also shows how economic analysis can be used to see through the political rhetoric, think critically about policy proposals, and formulate their views as citizens and voters.

I-D. A Pluralist Approach

Winston Churchill once said, “If you put two economists in a room, you get two opinions, unless one is Lord Keynes, in which case you get three.” To many, this plurality of opinions is perceived as a weakness. However, human behavior is complex. We often do not understand its causes or nature, much less how to precisely influence it in ways that result in socially preferred outcomes—the central dilemma of economic policy. As a result, addressing economic problems and inequality requires multiple perspectives and different research methods. There is no single ‘right’ way to do economics. Yet, this is an educator’s implicit position to students when they only present the Neoclassical approach to economics.

In my courses, I strive to introduce students to various methods and approaches to build their understanding of the economy. I emphasize that economics is a contested discipline with multiple schools of thought premised on different methodological approaches and assumptions about behavior within economic systems. These differences are critical to the predictions and conclusions an economist may come to about the causes of economic phenomena and the appropriate policy response.

The Neoclassical school of thought has dominated economic theory for decades, leading to a lack of diversity in perspectives and approaches. Alternative schools of thought, such as Post-Keynesian economics, Feminist economics, and Institutional economics, provide students diverse views on economic issues. This diversity can lead to a more nuanced understanding of economic

phenomena and a greater appreciation for the complexity of economic problems and their potential solutions.

These alternative schools of thought also emphasize the relevance of economic theory to real-world issues and problems. For example, post-Keynesian economics emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of money and finance in the economy and how this can impact economic stability and growth. Feminist economics emphasizes the importance of gender, race, and other social factors in shaping economic outcomes. By incorporating these alternative perspectives, students can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the real-world implications of economic theory.

Lastly, studying alternative schools of thought requires students to engage in critical thinking and analysis. By examining these schools' assumptions and theoretical frameworks, students can better understand how economic models and theories are constructed and how they can be evaluated or improved. This approach can lead to a more sophisticated understanding of economics and better equip students to evaluate economic policies and proposals.

I-E. Teaching interests

- i. Macroeconomics
- ii. International Finance
- iii. Comparative Economic Systems
- iv. Finance, Money, & Banking
- v. Public Finance
- vi. Time-series Analysis

II. Summary Teaching Experience

Table 1 below lists teaching or teaching assistant positions I have held at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Indiana University South Bend.

I have experience teaching Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, Money and Banking, and Intermediate Macro—in both in-person and online modalities. As an instructor, I have been responsible for developing and updating the course curriculum and syllabi (links are available in my teaching portfolio).

I was privileged to teach a special topic course on “Debt Economics.” I developed the course virtually from scratch. The goal of the course was to provide a foundational understanding of our financial system and public finance, but with a particular focus on the role of debt and how it impacts macroeconomic and social outcomes for households, including racial groups and students, firms, and the government sector. My approach to this course is illustrative of my teaching philosophy articulated above, taking an eclectic approach sourced from historical anthropology, sociology, complex systems analysis/models, and mainstream and post-Keynesian macro

perspectives (e.g., sectoral balances approach) and assigning a project in which would put those skills to use as a research paper. (A link to the syllabus of this course is provided in section V.)

In sum, I am well qualified to teach core theory courses at the intro and intermediate levels. In terms of electives, given my research orientation, I am especially keen on teaching Money and Banking, International Finance, and Comparative Economic Systems (the last two were my chosen sub-fields of study in earning my Economics Ph.D.)

TABLE 1. Summary of Teaching Experience

Courses Taught	Semester ^a	Role	Rating (Mean) ^b	Dept. Rating (Mean)
<i>University of Massachusetts Amherst</i>				
Econ 191: The Economics Behind Our Lives	Fall 2021	Instructor	3.38 ^c	3.3
Econ 204: Intermediate Macroeconomics	Summer 2021	Online Instructor	5.0	4.0
Econ 397SL Special Topics: Debt Economics	Spring 2021	Instructor	4.1	4.0
Econ 103: Introduction to Microeconomics	Fall 2020	Teaching Assistant	NA ^d	NA ^d
Econ 204: Intermediate Macroeconomics	Summer 2020	Online Instructor	4.5	4.4
Econ 204: Intermediate Macroeconomics	Spring 2020	Teaching Assistant	NA ^d	NA ^d
Econ 204: Intermediate Macroeconomics	Fall 2019	Online Instructor	4.5	4.4
Econ 204: Intermediate Macroeconomics	Fall 2019	Teaching Assistant	4.8	4.2
Econ 104: Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2018	Teaching Assistant	4.8	4.2
Econ 104: Introduction to Macroeconomics	Spring 2018	Teaching Assistant	4.8	4.2
Econ 104: Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2017	Teaching Assistant	3.8	4.2
Econ 311: Money and Banking	Fall 2017	Teaching Assistant	3.9	4.2
<i>Indiana University South Bend</i>				
Econ 104: Introduction to Macroeconomics	Fall 2015	Teaching Assistant	NA	NA

^a I worked as a research assistant during semesters not listed above.

^b Question: Overall rating of this instructor's teaching? (5 = Almost always effective, 1=Almost never effective)

^c Question: Overall, how would you rate your learning experience in this course? (4=Excellent, 1=Poor)

^d Not available. Regular instructor evaluation processes were suspended by the university due to COVID-19.

III. Selected Teaching Evaluations

I include below quantitative evaluations and selected student comments from the two courses I most recently taught as an independent instructor, followed by my two most recent semesters as a teaching assistant. The complete set of evaluations are available upon request.

III-A. Instructor

Econ 191: The Economics Behind Our Lives (Fall 2021)

Below, I present quantitative evaluations and select comments from the most recent course where I was the instructor, Econ 191. This course was unique in that it was a one-credit First Year Seminar course through the College of Social & Behavioral Sciences for new economics majors. The course is designed to help students with a smooth transition to attending college in the classroom and on campus and informs students about the academic field of economics at UMass-Amherst. While no economic theory was taught in this course, I used this opportunity to teach first-year students some basic skills I have seen lacking to some extent in my experience as a teaching assistant and instructor grading assignments in prior courses. For example, the basics of Excel and plotting data on a graph, as well as appropriate labeling and formatting skills. A portion of the course was also dedicated to teaching them the basics of putting together a research paper. For example, the basics of how to pose a research question or how to conduct a literature search.

TABLE 1. Quantitative evaluation of Econ 191 (Fall 2021)

Question	Rating (Mean)*	College average	Campus average
1 Your instructor was well prepared for class.	4.7	4.8	4.8
2 Your instructor inspired interest in the subject matter of this course.	4.3	4.4	4.6
3 Your instructor showed an interest in helping students learn.	4.7	4.8	4.8
4 Your instructor stimulated student participation in the class.	4.4	4.6	4.7
5 Your instructor welcomed differing points of view.	4.7	4.7	4.8
6 Your instructor was available for communication outside of class.	4.6	4.7	4.7
7 Your instructor seemed to care about the subject matter.	4.8	4.8	4.8

* Average of 4 sections. (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). Average response rate: 78%.

Select student comments:

Note: Evaluations with open ended responses for this course focused on what students learned from it and how it could be improved. But some of the comments, I think, are instructive in terms of showcasing what I hoped students would take away from the course, which was that economics has many subfields and, therefore, many different career opportunities and paths with an economics degree, as well as how to do research.

— “I learned a lot about the different types of economics and many things about Umass Amherst itself - especially the many opportunities and things to take advantage of at school.”

- “Most important thing that I take away from this course is the introduction to the many different types of Economic areas and the potential internship/offering that are available.”
- “The most important thing was the lessons on how to compile research and present your thoughts.”

Econ 397SL Special Topics: Debt Economics (Spring 2021)

Econ 397SL is a special topics course which, while regularly provided as part of the undergraduate program of the Economics Dept., provided graduate students the opportunity to develop and deliver their own curriculum as independent instructors. The only requirement was that a portion of the course had to be devoted to student loans. This was a very formative experience in the development of my teaching skills and understanding of how to construct a course.

However, delivery of the course was a challenge as the university was still in a remote only modality due to the pandemic. For some students, the Zoom environment was a drag on the course. Still, students were mostly positive, with many providing great feedback on how to improve the course and make it more interactive and engaging in ways that I believe can be applied both in the online environment and classroom environment.

TABLE 3. Quantitative evaluations of Econ 397SL (Spring 2021)

Question	Rating (Mean)*	Dept. average	Campus average
1 Instructor was well prepared for class.	4.6	4.6	4.7
2 Instructor explained course material clearly.	4.3	4.1	4.5
3 Instructor cleared up points of confusion.	4.5	4.1	4.5
4 Instructor used class time well.	4.5	4.2	4.5
5 Instructor inspired interest in the subject matter of this course.	3.8	4.0	4.5
6 Instructor showed an interest in helping students learn.	4.7	4.4	4.7
7 Received useful feedback on performance on tests, papers, etc.	4.8	4.0	4.4
8 The methods of evaluating my work were fair.	4.8	4.4	4.6
9 Instructor stimulated student participation.	3.4	4.2	4.6
10 What is your overall rating of this instructor’s teaching?	4.1	4.0	4.4
11 Overall, how much do you feel you have learned in this course?	3.7	3.6	3.9
12 What is your overall rating of this course?	3.7	3.6	4.0

* (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree.) Response rate: 71%.

Select student comments:

- “The assignments were the best part of this class. This is where I was able to take some ideas and practice them myself. My favorite was when we analyzed and made our own graphs in assignment 3. I thought it was super unique, and I haven’t done anything like it in other classes.”
- “He’s doing amazing! I had him for a TA when I was a freshman and now I’m a senior!! Creating his own content and assignments to learning how to go from a TA to a professor can be very difficult, but he has managed it with ease. It is great to see how far he has come!”
- “One of the best classes I have taken! Aaron is super knowledgeable and willing to help whenever we have questions. A great class and a great learning experience.”
- “The instructor is extremely knowledgeable, I felt this course could be a graduate course with the amount of information that was available. The instructor always came prepared with detailed slides and was always receptive to questions. The feedback on assignments was very detailed and allowed for easy interpretation.”
- “I really enjoyed the material and how relevant the topics were. I also loved the posting of podcasts because none of my other economics professors have done that.”
- “I liked that the material covered a lot of new topics related to debt that were missing from previous economics classes.”

Select comments from students responding to questions about the remote learning environment:

- “I wish there was a little more discussion, but it is really hard to engage students via Zoom. If this was in person I think there would be much more conversation and discussion about the material.”
- “More engagement would be good, such as discussion or even polling to see what we think about the ideas.”
- “Think Aaron handled it fairly well, considering all the difficulties of the online environment”
- “If it was in person I think it would have been great. Also, fewer readings would have been helpful.”

Select student comments from other courses:

Econ 204: Intermediate Macroeconomics (Summer 2021)

Note: Quantitative evaluations were not presented for this course as the response rate was too low to be representative (20%). But of the written feedback I did receive, it was positive.

- “I needed this course in order to fulfill my Econ requirements, Aaron Medlin as a professor was very prepared, and his lectures were well in depth and he made it easy to navigate / he kept the class interesting by incorporating current concepts such as the pandemic in an engaging discussion section of the classroom.”
- “The weekly outlines are very clear and easy to follow. Instructor’s lecture Videos explain more details on the materials. The instructor also provided knowledge beyond the textbook which are very interesting and useful to learn.”
- “I would consider retaking a class with this professor.”

III-B. Teaching Assistant

Econ 204: Intermediate Macroeconomics (Fall 2019)

TABLE 4. Quantitative evaluations for Econ 204 (Fall 2019)

Question	Rating (Mean)*	Dept. average	Camps average
1 The section leader explained course material clearly.	4.6	4.3	4.5
2 The section leader cleared up points of confusion.	4.9	4.3	4.5
3 The section leader showed an interest in helping students learn.	4.8	4.5	4.6
4 The section leader welcomed students' questions.	4.9	4.6	4.7
5 The section leader used class time well.	4.8	4.4	4.5
6 The section leader stimulated participation in the discussion/lab.	4.6	4.1	4.4
7 The section leader's evaluation of your work was fair.	4.8	4.3	4.5
8 Overall rating of the section leader's teaching?	4.8	4.2	4.4

* Average of 2 sections. (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree.) Average response rate: 35%.

Select student comments:

- “He really cared about the subject matter and his students and was one of best TA’s I’ve had during my time at UMass.”
- “Aaron really helped us out in the class. He was always willing to take time out of the day and help us with whatever we needed. I wish that I followed up with him more often but that is my fault and not his. He helped out a great amount.”
- “Good coverage of the materials and emphasized the points that were most important. Made up for actual professor’s lack of explanations and coverage during class time.”

Econ 104: Introduction to Macroeconomics (Fall 2018)

Table 5. Quantitative evaluations of Econ 104 (Fall 2018)

Question	Rating (Mean)*	Dept. average	Campus average
1 The section leader explained course material clearly.	4.8	4.3	4.5
2 The section leader cleared up points of confusion.	4.8	4.3	4.5
3 The section leader showed an interest in helping students learn.	4.8	4.5	4.6
4 The section leader welcomed students' questions.	4.9	4.6	4.7
5 The section leader used class time well.	4.8	4.4	4.5
6 The section leader stimulated participation in the discussion/lab.	4.6	4.2	4.4
7 The section leader's evaluation of your work was fair.	5.0	4.4	4.5
8 Overall rating of the section leader's teaching?	4.8	4.2	4.4

* Average of 2 sections. (5 = Strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). Average response rate: 30%.

Select student comments:

- “He was very helpful and willing to clear up any points of confusion/work through problems.”
- “They went in depth enough into topics so that we understood them but not as far as too confuse us.”
- “Always available for extra help and works around the students schedule.”
- “Aaron has a natural ability to break material down for better understanding. Overall, very knowledgeable on the material and I consider myself lucky to have had him as my discussion leader.”
- “Explained material clearly. Learned more here than lecture.”
- “Mr. Medlin was extremely helpful in reinforcing the information provided during lectures. Mr. Medlin clearly understood all course material to a great extent which helped us learn more.”

Additional comments from other courses:

Econ 104: Introduction to Macroeconomics (Spring 2018)

- “The best TA I ever had. He explained every points clearly in our discussion, and helped us to go through review stuffs. It was really helpful!!”
- “He had a huge understanding of the topics discussed and he was very keen on helping us all.”
- “Aaron has a natural ability to break material down for better understanding. Overall, very knowledgeable on the material and I consider myself lucky to have had him as my discussion leader.”

- “I really liked how Aaron set up discussions - he would go over the week’s material in a methodic manner that made topics covered in lecture and in the readings a lot easier to digest. He would also clearly articulate what material we should focus on for exams, which definitely helped me to differentiate topics within my notes. Overall he was a really good TA and made sure to make himself available to us.”
- “He clearly explained any questions that anybody in the class had during the discussion. He truly wanted us to know the information and retain it, not just memorize for the exam.”

IV. Teaching Reference

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V. Sample Syllabi

Below, I provide web links to the syllabus of three of the courses I have most recently taught in which I created the course curriculum in whole or in part.

Econ 191: The Economics Behind Our Lives

https://aaronmedlin.weebly.com/uploads/3/1/3/2/31329247/e191_fall_2021_syllabus.pdf

Econ 204: Intermediate Macroeconomics

https://aaronmedlin.weebly.com/uploads/3/1/3/2/31329247/econ_204-syllabus-summer2021v3.pdf

Econ 397SL Special Topics: Debt Economics

https://aaronmedlin.weebly.com/uploads/3/1/3/2/31329247/e397sl_debt_economics_spring_2021-syllabus_v2.pdf