Teaching Statement
Adam Osman
May 2022

By the end of the 2021-2022 academic year I will have taught three distinct courses during my time at the University of Illinois: (1) an undergraduate course: Economics of Poverty Alleviation (Econ 455), (2) a PhD elective course: Economics of Development and Growth (Econ 550), and (3) an MSPE elective course: Development and Growth Policy (Econ 519).

Undergraduate Course: Economics of Poverty Alleviation (Econ 455)

This is a new course that I designed and have taught seven times (Fall 2014, Spring 2016, Fall 2016, Fall 2017, Spring 2019, 2019, 2022). It is an elective course for juniors and seniors in economics with an interest in development economics. The course is split into three main phases: (1) theory and methodology, (2) poverty alleviation programs, and (3) impact evaluation design and presentations by the students.

The first phase takes six weeks and covers three topics. First we examine the theories on how to alleviate poverty in developing countries. I explain the different market failures that affect the poor (and the non-poor). Second, I discuss the importance of rigorous causal evidence in determining the impacts that market failures have on the lives of the poor. I also introduce the different methods by which economists estimate causal relationships. These methods include event-studies, simple difference, difference-in-differences, propensity score matching, regression discontinuity and randomized experiments. Third, we examine the statistics derived from estimating the impacts of interventions in a randomized experiment, calculate confidence intervals, run regressions in R & Stata and interpret tables from academic papers.

The lessons in the first phase are extremely important for the students. The distinction between correlation and causation is the heart of microeconomic policy analysis. Since many politicians and commentators confuse correlation with causation, this discussion helps students evaluate political and economic debates. I explain the flaws in using correlational findings to make causal conclusions and we use current news stories as engaging examples.

The second phase of the course takes seven weeks and examines scientific studies across a variety of topics. The students select the topics from a list that includes credit, savings, insurance, health, education, behavioral economics, international trade, infrastructure, transit, agriculture, technology adoption and labor markets.

I begin each topic with a problem statement on the blackboard and follow a five step process to show them the full life cycle of a policy idea. For example, one problem statement has been “Poor children have low levels of educational attainment”. In the first step I ask the students to provide the different reasons why they think the statement might be true. For example, the possible reasons can include: “they don’t have the money for fees”, “their parents want them to work”, or “they don’t know that school is good for them”. In the second step we discuss each reason and I will ask the students to identify the underlying market failures. For example, we would discuss how financial market failures could cause an inability to pay for school fees even if those fees would be a good investment. The third step is a discussion of the policy solutions for each reason. For example, policy solutions could include providing longer term loans to the poor, providing subsidies through conditional cash transfers, or increasing funding to the education system. The fourth step is to design an evaluation that would provide an empirical test of one or two of the policy solutions. We consider all four main impact evaluation designs: randomized experiments, regression discontinuities, difference in differences, and simple differences, and describe the advantages and disadvantages of each approach related to the policy proposal. Finally, I present a few papers on each topic that have implemented one of the solutions they suggested using one of the empirical methods that they described. This is designed to teach them that doing important policy research is within their grasp.

During this part of the course they have two main assignments. The first assignment is an evaluation critique, and the second is an academic paper summary. In the first assignment students find an evaluation from an NGO or social enterprise, identify its flaws, and describe how those flaws could be addressed. For the second assignment students identify an academic paper, summarize what the authors did, and discuss what an NGO can learn from the paper.

The final phase of the class takes two weeks and is comprised of student presentations. Students identify an NGO, discuss the market failures they address, critique any current evaluation done of the organization and design a better evaluation. Other students in the class are encouraged to engage with the presenters and ask them questions. Students are evaluated based on their presentation and participation. My student evaluations for this course have ranged from 4.3-4.8 in overall effectiveness, and 4.2-4.8 in overall quality.

Ph.D. Course: Economics of Development and Growth (Econ 550)

My Ph.D. course is structured in a similar way to phases 2 and 3 of my undergraduate course but implemented at a much higher level of discussion and proficiency. The majority of the course (13 weeks) discusses market failures in developing countries, how these market failures are intertwined and how researchers could broaden our understanding of how to improve the lives of the poor and promote growth in middle- and low- income countries.

For each topic, I discuss a problem statement and ask the students to identify the market failures, potential solutions, and empirical tests for those solutions. The PhD students will usually take over the discussion and outline all the ways in which a researcher could tackle the problem. We then discuss research papers that have addressed the topic at hand.

Early in the class, the Ph.D. students are required to outline their research interests and the existing literature on that topic. I discuss their interests with each student individually outside of class time. They are required to write a referee report on a job market paper from the top students on the job market that year. The students also present important papers from the syllabus and replicate the results from an experiment using STATA. I also invite the other faculty in development economics to join one lecture and brainstorm with the students about potential research projects that they could pursue.

The students are required to write and present an original research paper by the end of semester. The student needs to obtain some data, provide an identification strategy and present some early results. This assignment is designed to start the students toward their third-year paper, a requirement of the Ph.D. program. The first two times I taught this course I my evaluations ranged from 3.8-4.4 in overall effectiveness, and 3.8-4.0 in overall quality. The most recent three times I taught the course my evaluations increased to 4.6-5.0 in overall effectiveness, and 4.7-5.0 in overall quality.

MSPE Course: Development & Growth Policy (Econ 519)

This course is for our Masters of Science in Policy Economics. It has a similar format to the undergraduate course but is a more rigorous and accelerated version. In particular, I spend more time on data analysis tools, examine more challenging questions and expect more from the evaluation critique and academic paper summary. I also require that they design an evaluation and present it to their classmates. My evaluations have ranged from 4.3-4.8 in overall effectiveness, and 4.3-4.6 in overall quality

Final Thoughts:

Overall, I enjoy teaching and am passionate about equipping undergraduate and MSPE students with the tools to understand policy and research papers in development economics and teaching Ph.D. students to produce new research. Our society has many well-intentioned people who want to make the world a better place but do not know how to do this effectively. The lessons from these courses are not specific to development policy and can be applied to business problems as well. I hope that the students from these classes are able to bring rigor and insight to their careers. I’ve received many kind comments in course evaluations and in person that students have enjoyed my class more than any other they have taken. A handful of students have told me tell me that they have changed their career paths based on my courses.