

SHOMAK CHAKRABARTI

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

001H KELLER BUILDING, UNIVERSITY PARK, PA 16802. USA.

☎ (+91)-869-761-5581 ✉ CHAKRABARTI.SHOMAK@GMAIL.COM 🌐 SHOMAKCHAKRABARTI.COM

Teaching Statement

“Shomak seemed like he really cared about the students. His weekly emails were encouraging and him and his team provided feedback on each assignment which helped on the exams. He returned grades quickly and always provided his own notes on the lessons each week. The extra homework problems on canvas really helped.”

The care and dedication reflected in the above student review was instilled in me from a very young age. I grew up in a household where both my parents are professors, and learnt from their tireless dedication to imparting knowledge every single day. This natural inclination towards teaching today pays its dividends in the form of unparalleled joy of watching young pupils develop their argumentative and scholastic skills. My curiosity to understand the logic behind societal decisions motivated me to take up Economics as a discipline. Sparking the same curiosity and logical reasoning among my students today instils in me the same pride and motivation that I saw in my parents’ eyes. While their role in my development as an academic can’t be understated, it was the experiences of my academic career that gave a concrete shape to my core teaching philosophy.

During my time as a graduate student at Penn State, I was fortunate to be a teaching assistant for a variety of courses ranging from introductory microeconomics, applied courses in the economics of the corporation, as well as theoretically advanced course like intermediate econometrics, intermediate microeconomics, and the economics of law and regulation (4th year courses). My duties broadly included conducting office hours, holding review sessions, and regular pastoring of undergraduate students. At the initial stages, I worked as a teaching assistant for the introductory courses which typically comprised about 400 students. On the other hand, I have also worked as an instructor for Intermediate Macroeconomics (Summer 2020) and Intermediate Macroeconomics (Summer 2019) courses. These courses typically comprised of 40 students and provided me ample opportunity to provide individual care to the students. I had to design and conduct lectures, take exams, hold regular office hours, and co-ordinate with the TA assigned to my courses. My penchant for teaching is not just restricted to classrooms - I’ve often taught in online classes even before the pandemic. TO this end, I’ve received the Graduate Student Online Teaching Certificate from Penn State in Dec 2017.

I believe that an essential quality of an academic lies in understanding and utilising the **feedback loop** between teaching, research, and student interactions. Regular office hours and review sessions have provided valuable experience in understanding issues that students typically face in class. A typical class at Penn State comprises of a large number of international students with diverse cultural and academic background. As a result, many students come to my office hours struggling to cope up with the mathematical rigour, while many whose first language is not English struggle in writing essays. My role as an instructor is to try to *level the playing field* to the best of my ability. For instance, I recently taught the Intermediate Microeconomics course which introduces the mathematical foundations for microeconomic theory to third year undergraduate students. At the outset, I spent a couple of lectures conducting a “*math camp*” - introducing students to the concepts of optimisation, a bit of algebra and linear analysis. Many students came back to me subsequently to tell me how beneficial the crash course was for a better understanding of my course, as well as other courses that they took. On the other hand, I made it a point to provide tips on improving English in any assignment and encouraged students to come and discuss their issues in my office hours without inhibition. I often gave them simple essay questions (*e.g. summarise the lecture that I gave today*) to make them practice their writing skills.

The other wing of the feedback loop, the link between research and teaching, is as important. Incorporating one’s own research into the curriculum is a natural way to implement this link. This is typically easier in post-graduate courses. For example, I have helped develop *lecture notes on decision theory* with Prof Lamba for graduate micro courses. Nonetheless, I did introduce a very basic lecture on economic networks in the Intermediate Microeconomics course. The students were extremely enthusiastic about learning something different in class, and this helps developing curiosity among the students. However, this is certainly *not* the

only way to implement this link of the loop. Research fosters clarity in a discipline, which in turn imparts **simplicity** when teaching. I had the immense pleasure of being taught by teachers like Prof Krishna, Prof Ali and Prof Haghpanah whose simplicity in teaching extremely difficult concepts and papers have been exemplary. This in turned helped us understand limitations and merits of the models we were taught in a transparent way. I have actively tried to emulate them in my own teaching, trying to teach students abstract concepts through the lens of simplified setups and real world illustrations. To give a simple concrete example, consider the celebrated law of demand. I would meticulously go through the steps involved in deriving the law of demand from individual utility maximising behaviour. However, I would put as much emphasis on teaching students the limitations of the model - e.g., the assumption that income is held constant in these models. I would try, wherever possible, to show illustrations where the predictions of the model may fail.

No learning environment can thrive without fostering a sense of **inclusivity**. Students irrespective of their gender, social, or economic identity should be given the same opportunity to develop their academic career in my class. I believe that active participation and group discussions are extremely useful tools to foster a sense of inclusivity. To this end, I conducted weekly “coffee hour” meetings in my macroeconomics course where students could engage in discussions on the material that had been covered: there have been extensive discussions on the extent to which FED policies can be explained by the models they learnt, how these models could be improved, among other things. This allows students to engage in critical thinking, and the informal atmosphere allows them to speak without the anxiety of a classroom. However, a lot of students are too shy to engage in discussions. This is often the case among international students who find it difficult to express their opinions in English. I actively try to engage with them during discussions, and often ask them to pen their arguments if they are unwilling to talk. Being patient with these students seem to be beneficial for them to start voicing their opinion. My role as an instructor does not end with textbook theories. Students have often approached me with with concerns they have faced in the university with respect to their identities. I have always lent them a helping hand, and provided necessary assistance wherever it was required on my part. I have been immensely fortunate to have worked in a place where my identity as a person of colour has been celebrated. But not all students are as fortunate, and I've spent time during my office hours help students cope with the difficulties they have faced. My commitment to inclusivity, albeit at an unofficial level, goes back before my graduate school days. As a MA student, my friends and I started tutorial sessions for students entering their MA program from underprivileged communities. My job was to teach students introductory game theory and parts of real analysis. Similarly, during my undergraduate days, I used to tutor students in the junior years (including students who took up Economics as Honours as well as Pass subjects). These experiences, albeit unofficial, was instrumental in shaping my desire for teaching.

This collaborative approach to critical thinking and the ability to freely communicate forms the core of my teaching philosophy. The diverse composition of students across departments is a great fit to utilise and improve upon these ideals. Students from other fields like politics and policy sciences who attend the undergraduate classes will definitely provide me a new perspective as an economist. Moreover, teaching at the Masters level courses can allow me to incorporate my own research into the academic curriculum. I hope to contribute to this thriving interaction between teaching and research if given the opportunity. I have been lucky in life to have been taught by some truly wonderful teacher and have always dreamt to be in their shoes one day. I hope to ignite the same passion for Economics among my students, and motivate them to push the frontiers of our discipline.