Teaching Statement

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Teaching is an amazing job. You are interacting with different students every year and you never know how much influence you have on their lives. Keeping that responsibility in the back of my mind, I embrace each and every opportunity and give my all to teaching.

The students recognize my effort and on evaluations they describe me as “helpful”, “goes above and beyond”, “connected with students”, “supportive”, and “available for anything”. Students also praise me for being “knowledgeable” and “always prepared”, which I attribute to my broad set of teaching experiences. At the University of South Carolina, I taught college algebra, finite mathematics, and calculus as the instructor. I also led Maple lab several times, which is a calculus recitation using Maple to visualize and solve problems. After coming to the University of Illinois, I experienced being a teaching assistant for the Merit Program in all three courses of the calculus sequence. I also got to briefly touch on precalculus, differential equations, and linear algebra as a grader or tutor. The collective experience is an invaluable asset when it comes to designing course materials and mentoring undergraduate students.

During my first year teaching at the University of Illinois, I was fortunate to be able to participate in the Merit Program. The active learning environment, which is based on students working in groups on challenging worksheets, gave me the chance to observe students’ approach and reaction to mathematics in a very personal setting. The close interaction helped me identify my teaching philosophy—I want students to learn about themselves through feedback I provide and use the knowledge to become successful in college. I openly share this goal with my students and find them much more engaged when they realize the course is not just a math course, but an experience that will affect their personality and future career. I believe that it is the teacher’s responsibility to help students see the big picture when it comes to how this course can improve their lives.

I strive to fulfill my goal with every opportunity regardless of the role and duty I am assigned, whether it be instructor, teaching assistant, tutor, or grader. In a lecture setting, I spend the beginning and the last five minutes often not just outlining important concepts, but giving pep talks. Students respond to challenges and they step up their game. I also follow lectures with pop quizzes that serve as a reminder that learning is a continuous effort and students should actively aim to understand lectures. During group discussion settings, I encourage students to provide different opinions and to think about diversity in personalities. Specially designed worksheets also work wonders to help the students identify reasons they lose focus or make small mistakes. Interactions with students as a tutor or grader are very precious, since those are very similar to office hours. I make sure I maintain an open and honest attitude and relate every question to a big picture comment. Once I gain a better understanding of the student, I start giving feedback on various aspects of the course for them to think about. I am proud to say that I have received many thanks from students that walk away feeling like they learned something about themselves.

Giving students accurate feedback is the central theme of my teaching philosophy. We have the standard set of feedback from exams and various similar activities in the form of grades. This type of feedback is not complete unless the teacher describes in detail how
to interpret it. For example, when going over an exam with a student, I would mention my observation of how prepared and engaged he/she is in class. While avoiding judging the student in any form, I convey the idea that their performance is closely related to how they interact with the instructor as well as fellow students. The main emphasis is to let them realize what they can actively do in order to accomplish their goals. The students benefit from simple honesty in feedback because it helps them see themselves differently. There is a second, more abstract, type of feedback, which involves constantly questioning the students about how they feel about their progress. This can be done by a questionnaire or integrated into a worksheet. I ask my students to choose from a list of adjectives that describes their feelings toward their progress in the course. The answers they give might be short and meaningless in itself, but the students often tell me that it sparked their desire to change. The questionnaire also serves as an excellent discussion topic in a one-to-one setting, often leading to a deep reflection of the student’s life style. There is no better way to motivate students than to help them motivate themselves. I find it greatly encouraging when a student actively asks for feedback because he/she trusts that I can point him/her in the right direction.

The journey to becoming a better teacher is never-ending, but I believe that I am on the right track. Every course I teach still reminds me that teaching is a tough process of endless pondering and reflecting on my teaching skills. However, I have confidence in the current me to take up the challenge of teaching any math course and to continue to grow as a teacher.