Teaching Statement of Charles J. Thomas

I have taught varied audiences and class sizes, experimented with various techniques, and really come to enjoy teaching. I suppose my enjoyment should not have been a surprise given how much I enjoyed informal teaching activities in college and graduate school, mainly tutoring undergrads and younger PhD students in math and economics. Still, I was unsure how much I would like teaching “for real” when I first stepped in to teach MBAs at Rochester’s Simon Business School. I loved it, but I had much to learn.

My approach to teaching has been shaped by my public policy experience at the US Federal Trade Commission, by teaching MBAs at the Simon School, and by several of my senior colleagues at Clemson. At the FTC I elicited information from business people in interviews and depositions, and I conveyed complex economic arguments to attorneys and Commissioners. Both tasks forced me to think in plainer terms than did my graduate training, and I soon appreciated the benefits of explaining complex ideas in simple ways.

At the Simon School I taught strategic decision making to MBAs and executive MBAs who took the eminently reasonable approach of wanting to know how the tools I was teaching could increase their profits. Moreover, they operated in strategic environments much messier than the models I use in my research. Their reaction to the subject matter led me to consider it in the same light of practicality and implementation. Not to abandon the theoretical modeling and abstract reasoning, but to keep in mind the real-world purpose of the toolkit I was providing. The most obvious aspect of this was my realization that “best-responses” are more important to practitioners than is “equilibrium”: You should optimize against what you think your rival will do, not what an abstract model says your rival should do. Equilibrium closes the loop, to be sure, but if you have good reason to think your rival will choose a particular strategy, then best-respond to that strategy.

Finally, the senior colleagues that drew me to Clemson had excellent economic fundamentals, and they helped me develop my “economic sense.” I am a much better economist because of my time here. Their influence is evident in the greater emphasis I put on intuition and simple stories that illustrate it.

My primary course goal is for students to understand the basics of the subject matter, but I also hope some students will come to appreciate as I do the material’s deeper aspects. I started economics late in college, but I still vividly recall how quickly I was captivated by my first course, Principles of Microeconomics.

I try to reach these goals by actively involving students in the learning process, in ways I’ll describe below for some of the courses I teach at Clemson. On occasion I also purposely go off on tangents to discuss other matters relevant to the students’ development. These include explaining to first-semester freshmen the importance of getting to know some professors well (if they are genuinely interested, and not merely for the purposes of schmoozing), because in a few years’ time they’ll need recommendation letters from faculty who know them as more than just a name in the grade book. I advise graduate students how to approach a conference, let them know they’ll likely hit some dead ends when looking for dissertation topics (which is part of the process), and encourage them to talk with more than their primary advisor (again for purposes of job market letters, but also to get more feedback on their research).

**Principles of Microeconomics:** My first 5 years at Clemson I taught this course every semester with fewer than 40 students per class, while my next two years I taught it in the fall semester with over 300 students. After my return to Clemson I began teaching a small section for students in Clemson’s Honors College.

The different class sizes and audiences involve different approaches, but they share two important features: First, I heavily emphasize the “principles” aspect of Principles of Microeconomics, the idea that a few key concepts help one to make decisions and to understand a vast amount of observed behavior. Second, I have developed numerous examples of economic concepts that resonate with the students. I recognized the importance of this soon after arriving at Clemson, when I realized that MBAs differed from college students because the latter (especially freshmen) typically have not thought much about why things happen in the world. Part of my task is helping them relate to the material and see its broader applicability.

The small-lecture format evolved to short spans of lecturing interspersed with questions or problems analyzed in small groups, then discussed by the entire class. A few class meetings involved experiments with financial incentives, most notably introducing supply and demand with double-auctions, and using private negotiations to solve externality problems. As a general matter I interacted a lot with the students.
The large-lecture format was less interactive due to sheer scale, and it involved less face-time with the students because the third 50-minute session per week was a discussion section with a TA. My preparation for the reduced class time forced me to focus on the essential parts of what I wanted to convey in each class meeting, what I refer to as “conceptual nuggets.” As a counterpart to my questions and problems from the small lectures, I learned to use the iClicker classroom response system to engage the students and provide immediate feedback about their understanding of the material. Moreover, I worked with the TAs to help them incorporate with their own teaching ideas the problems and questions I’d developed over the years.

The Honors sections I started teaching in 2016 have 20-25 of Clemson’s most academically gifted students. I kept the “2 lecture plus a discussion section” format from the large-lecture version, because it works so well, with me in the role of the TA. In non-Honors courses our Friday discussion sections involve reviewing that week’s material and going over that week’s homework. I presume the Honors students can handle such review on their own, so we devote our discussion sections to running experiments or engaging in discussions that apply economic concepts to issues such as minimum wages, the gender-wage gap, environmental policy, antitrust policy, and (importantly at Clemson) considering better ways to allocate football tickets to students.

**Graduate Industrial Organization:** I have taught this course several times, typically with 8-10 PhD students. I lecture to introduce some topics’ game-theoretic underpinnings (the need for which diminished after I started teaching game theory in our PhD micro core), but most class meetings are discussions of papers. I take a realistic approach to my reading list, in that each class meeting involves a single paper. The students consequently read each paper in advance, and come prepared to discuss it and ask questions. One aspect of this I find particularly rewarding is observing how much they improve over the semester. The students enthusiastically give me similar feedback about the confidence they gained in reading and understanding journal articles, a necessary ingredient for their professional success.

Another important aspect of this course is that most discussions are preceded by a student introducing the paper with a 15-minute conference-style presentation, which gives the students experience preparing for such a forum. My first time teaching this course, I had the students simply show up and give their presentations, but the quality was uneven. Since then I discuss each student’s presentation with them a few days ahead. This approach improves the presentations’ quality, but more importantly gives the students more helpful feedback about this important aspect of being an academic, especially describing one’s research simply.

**Undergraduate Game Theory:** I introduce each topic with an experiment, in lieu of assigned reading. We follow the experiments with discussions analyzing why students made the choices they did, what they thought their rivals were doing, how they might act differently upon seeing the results, and what modifications to the experiments might lead to interesting insights or a more realistic strategic scenario. Each experiment forms the basis of lectures on the associated topic, so the initial experiment and discussion ensure students have thought about the subject matter before we work through its theoretical underpinnings. Team-based problem solving interspersed during lectures lets students learn from and teach their peers.

**Industrial Organization Workshop:** Finally I want to mention the workshop I founded in Clemson’s economics department. I like the training model in the laboratory sciences, especially the “lab meetings” in which a lab member discusses their research progress since their last presentation. Of course I didn’t have a lab, but I organized graduate students and faculty doing IO research for weekly one-hour sessions year-round. This forum greatly benefits students, who present their work frequently, get feedback from many others with similar interests, hear feedback provided to other presenters, and think critically about other people’s research. One testament to the workshop’s value is that the department now has several workshops in other fields.

There are other courses I’d like to develop and teach beyond those mentioned above. Teaching undergraduate IO would be fun, and I like the idea of such a course as a prelude to a Socratic-style course on antitrust. I also have been thinking about a negotiation course for undergrads or MBAs that combines theory, experiential learning, and speakers from local and alumni business communities.