Teaching Statement   Wahideh Achbari

During my academic career I have always appreciated the opportunity to convey scientific knowledge and methodologies. The following teaching philosophy, evidencing my commitment to excellent teaching, has resulted from my experience with students at different levels, ranging from first years to advanced students. I have served as a university lecturer, course convenor, tutor, and mentor, which has given me the following insights.

To me scientific education is a dynamic process with three goals: 1) reducing science anxiety and theory aversion, 2) encouraging cooperation between students with an eye for diversity in the classroom, and 3) ensuring that students understand essential concepts and can apply these critically and independently. My experience has taught me that students will only truly absorb the material if they are actively involved. Therefore, a lecturer cannot solely rely on traditional teaching methods, but must encourage academic debate, offer tailored exercises, and provide non-generic feedback. Students should learn to think independently, but also require direction at critical moments.

Cooperation between different students is both a goal and a means to keep them engaged. Cooperation encourages the exchange of ideas between peers and prevents science aversion and anxiety. Quantitative methods courses can be particularly prone to such anxiety. To encourage a cooperative atmosphere where students are allowed to make mistakes, I create small groups during tutorials. In doing so, I make sure I divide students in diverse groups (diversity here refers not only to socio-economic and migration background, but also to skills). I keep my distance when required to reduce pressure and provide practical examples. Making errors in an informal setting helps students to overcome science anxiety. My alternative approach to teaching was appreciated by my students, which resulted in being nominated for a "The Best Teaching Award".

This approach has also served me in supervising interns and research assistants. The students I supervised often conceived their own research plans within my research projects, and these, in turn, were implemented. While advanced students are often motivated and can work fairly independently, they need to be guided at crucial times in order to not lose sight of the bigger picture and the project goal. Therefore, I encourage them to regularly ask questions and to break down their tasks in smaller ones, which helps them to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

For academically informed discussions in tutorials and workshops, I will use a digital tool named Perusall. This is an interactive social annotation tool that can be integrated with Canvas. Perusall allows students and their teachers to collaboratively markup *.pdf* documents. Instead of individually reading a document and then discussing it, Perusall allows the text to be read and discussed collectively. I can review this process and easily check the performance of the students. Perusall also helps to make sense of the annotations by providing a 'confusion report' and overviews of most upvoted comments and questions. This allows the students to recognise key points in the literature and to actively learn from each other when facing challenging theoretical content, while I can detect where students struggle.

Although exams and essays are important to the assessment process, we should also employ alternatives. Writing policy briefs, for example, can show the students how theoretical discussions and empirical findings have real life application. I designed a task in which students were asked to consult a specialised website (MIPEX) to summarize empirical data and to write a policy brief for a minister. The minister, was hypothetically taking part in an EU summit on immigrant integration, and had only 30 minutes to prepare their stance. This served to highlight how crucial it is to succinctly summarise and present data, while signalling the relevance of scientific enquiry in policy circles.

I believe the best way to improve the quality of teaching is through enhancing pedagogical skills, and an up-to-date theoretical and methodological knowledge by committing oneself to continuous improvement. I aim to show students why asking questions is crucial to scientific enquiry, and do not see a clear divide between teaching and research. By using examples from my own research, I can illustrate the importance of the studied material. Teaching and supervision often help me to see research questions in a new light. I believe that academic education is a dynamic process where students are an active part of their learning experience, to which they contribute their diverse perspectives, rather than being a passive vessel for knowledge.