

TEACHING STATEMENT

GABE CUNNINGHAM

Teaching is the most important thing I do. It is my opportunity to directly affect the lives of hundreds of people every year. I feel lucky to be entrusted with such a great responsibility, and so I constantly strive to improve as a teacher and mentor. My success as a teacher has come from the respect I show my students, from the energy I bring to the classroom, and from my willingness to adapt.

Great teaching starts with respect. On the first day of class, I hand out a “Student Info Sheet” where students can tell me the name they prefer to be called, their concerns about the class, and something about themselves. This helps me to immediately develop a personal connection with my students. In class, I encourage students to ask questions and I answer them without judgement. This is especially important in a class like Calculus, where many students come in with a deep fear of math. I respect my students’ time by making good use of our time together and by assigning meaningful work outside of class. Finally, I listen to my students’ struggles with sympathy, and I make accommodations when appropriate, such as when a student has an obligation to travel for work or has to care for a sick child or parent.

In class, I don’t just want to teach my students the definition of a derivative – I want to show them the joy of mathematics! I frequently use humor and amusing examples in class to keep students’ attention and to aid their memory. For example, when teaching students about limits in Calculus, I tell them that the symbol $0/0$ stands for $m0re/w0rk$ (writing in the letters around each 0). I often see students write this on the final exam, demonstrating that they remembered that trick for the whole semester! I also share articles and interesting websites with students, and I’ve even lent out math-related books from my collection. Students respond very positively to my enthusiasm in the classroom, often mentioning it in my teaching evaluations as an aspect of the class that they loved.

I frequently reassess and revise my teaching practices. I keep up with education research, and I am willing to experiment with new techniques. This semester, I have structured my classes to have a significant Active Learning component, where students are held responsible for reading outside of class, and most of our class time is spent with students working on problems. So far, I am encouraged by how it seems to be working. Throughout the semester, I keep a “lab notebook” of what is working well and what challenges I’ve faced. I refer to these notes when planning my next semester so that I can make choices that will provide my students with the best possible learning experience.

My success as a teacher is evident in my teaching evaluations, the way students talk about me, and the honors I have received. My average rating of instructor effectiveness over the last seven years is 4.8/5, with students praising my approachability and my ability to break down difficult concepts and present them in a clear way. I often hear from new students that I came highly recommended from their friends, and the waiting lists for my classes are

always full of people who are hoping to get into my section. Last spring, I was selected as the recipient of the Face-to-Face Innovation Teaching Award as part of the University of Massachusetts Boston Conference on Teaching, Learning, and Technology. This semester, I was selected to be an Active Learning Fellow; as part of that, I am participating in a weekly seminar where we design learning activities and discuss teaching challenges. The feedback and awards that I receive help energize me and encourage me to continue to develop my teaching.

In addition to teaching, I am the ongoing Course Coordinator for Calculus 1. In this role, I share information and resources with other instructors, helping our Calculus classes to develop a common culture while encouraging each instructor to put their own stamp on the class. Many of our new hires have thanked me for sharing so many materials (such as a syllabus, exams, and homework assignments) and making their jobs that much easier. Of course, helping the instructors also helps their students, and so as a Course Coordinator I have the ability to improve the educational experience for all of our Calculus 1 students.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to use my gift and passion for teaching. The connections I have made with my students have enriched my life and helped me aspire to not just teach my students, but to lead and inspire them. I look forward to helping students through mathematics and life for many more years.