

# KEVIN A. ANGSTADT

## STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

I tend to be suspicious of educators claiming to be successful teachers, which I have seldom observed to be true in practice. Instead, teachers whom peers and students praise tend to be the shining stars of their profession. As such, I make no claims of being a successful teacher in this statement. Instead, I will try to present my past teaching efforts and attempt to characterize my teaching with respect to teaching style, student learning, and inclusive environments.

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

I have been teaching, in some official capacity, for the past eight years. Broadly, I have:

- Taught Computer Science at several levels, including: introductory summer camps; intermediate, major-required courses; and upper-level electives. I also have experience with team-teaching.
- Facilitated learning in small (8-15 students), medium (30-50 students), and large (70-100+ students) classrooms, each for at least two semesters.
- Designed courses from scratch and modified existing courses, including developing lecture material, assignments, projects, and assessments. These efforts include refining the material over multiple offerings of the course as well as incorporating research ideas.
- Managed staffs of graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants (ranging from 1 to 27).
- Participated in professional development programs to improve my teaching (Tomorrow's Professor Today at UVA and the Graduate Teaching Certificate program at U-M) and to help other instructors improve their teaching (serving as an Engineering Teaching Consultant at U-M).

### TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

My approach to teaching is exemplified by the following anonymous quote from a student evaluation:

I decided to attend the first class on a whim and knew by the first meeting that this was going to be a great class. [...] I noticed after a bit that I was applying techniques learned in the functional programming section in my everyday programs. [...] This class was challenging but also a very welcoming place to learn. Kevin was a really great instructor and really made an effort to be accessible to us and engage the class. Thanks again for this phenomenal course!

No document I write will fully capture my teaching philosophy, but I might simplify and summarize my approach to teaching with three interrelated tenets: reaching students who feel left out, active learning and student engagement, and centering course design around goals.

**REACHING STUDENTS WHO FEEL LEFT OUT.** Such students include—but are not limited to—learners from different fields of study, non-traditional students, and students from different socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. The challenge of reaching these students motivates me to improve and adapt my teaching, and I continue to tweak my content and delivery to reach more students. While designing courses to support students who feel left out, my approach often benefits all.

From my experiences teaching in both the humanities (German as an undergraduate TA) and the sciences, I find that students from one area often struggle in another because they have different

training in the process of learning. Loosely, I have found that some students are more successful memorizing complicated facts and algorithms while others prefer regenerating complex ideas from a small set of ground truths and rules.<sup>1</sup> As such, I design my courses to support both approaches. When teaching students to convert regular expressions to finite automata in programming languages, I both provide the conversion rules (for memorization) and also explain how these rules were created (for rule abstraction). I test students' ability to successfully solve problems that require converting regular expressions to automata, allowing both those students who memorize the rules and those who regenerate the rules to be successful.

Reaching left-out students also necessitates mitigating outside factors, such as stereotype threat and impostor syndrome. I make an effort to vary my examples and explain background for students who might be unfamiliar with a particular idea. Language can be quite powerful, so I make a conscious effort to thoughtfully wield my words. I try to normalize struggle with material and avoid characterizing material as "hard" or "easy." A former TA wrote the following to me the semester after working for a course I co-instructed:

You also just brought a really kind, thoughtful and inclusive focus to staff that made me feel more comfortable bringing that sort of focus to the table myself. Essentially, you just made [the class] really human and approachable.

**ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS.** Students learn best when they are actively involved in the learning process. I prefer presenting material using whiteboards (or digital whiteboards) rather than slides as this medium allows me to adapt course material on the fly in response to student understanding and questions. Active learning is a central tenet of my teaching philosophy. In larger classrooms, I often rely on think-pair-share activities, and in smaller settings, I particularly enjoy using techniques such as large group discussions, hands-on technology (coding in the classroom), interactive lectures, and activity-based review sessions. I also include frequent assessment techniques in my courses. For example, I have developed a practice of beginning each of my class meetings with a review of material from the previous classes. I ask students to verbally summarize and paraphrase the concepts they have learned and do not help the students unless they become particularly stuck on a topic. This assessment helps me to gauge student understanding and retention and also incorporates review for exams directly into each class.

**GOAL-ORIENTED OVER CONTENT-ORIENTED LEARNING.** I strongly believe a teacher's primary role is to be a facilitator of learning. Instead of fixating on a set of topics to cover, I try to design my course material to focus on *problem solving*, *computational thinking*, *process*, and *communication*. Much like novels in a literature class might be chosen to allow for discussion of particular themes and literary devices, I view the topics and facts of a Computer Science course primarily as a vehicle for developing these high-level skills.

My views have largely been shaped by my own undergraduate education in the Liberal Arts, where "lectures" were often driven forward by student participation in response to questions posed by the instructor, and problem solving was a primary focus. As an instructor, I have implemented aspects of this approach to learning in courses that have largely been content-oriented. In addition to the active learning strategies I previously described, I also adapt my syllabi to feature learning objectives and have trained my course staff on goal-oriented exam design (an approach that continues to be used in the class even now that I am no longer an instructor).

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<sup>1</sup> Similar models have been studied in psychology to characterize concept learning (e.g., memorization vs. rule abstraction).