

# FASS Graduate Students' Teaching Award

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Semester I

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*Joseph chasing sunsets at FASS.*

### **Which learning strategies have you found to be the most effective?**

I find it helpful to simplify ideas into layman terms. For example, to think of the consumer choice problem as the choice between apples and oranges. Likewise, to think of intertemporal trade-offs through various assets against the alternative of putting a dollar in the bank. By stripping away part of the mental load of abstraction, we can help build some intuition about whether a particular result is sensible or not.

Something else that I find helpful is to try to identify the assumptions that a model makes. It can be helpful to ask questions like, "what trade-offs are incurred in choosing that assumption?" For example, consider the idea of money neutrality - it is pretty intuitive that if for some reason we have a big increase in money supply this should result in a big increase in the general price level. We can build a model to help us understand this intuition, and see how prices respond to a helicopter drop of money. Such a model is nice in its simplicity, but would likely require some assumptions, like full information and perfect price flexibility. We know that in reality there are factors that prevent prices from being fully flexible, and the model cannot capture these effects.

In my limited experience, looking at many examples to understand a particular concept can be very helpful, but it is even more helpful when it is done purposefully. I mean this in two senses, first, going beyond pattern recognition, to consciously seeking to understand the key concepts at the heart of the different examples. Second, to try our best to identify the features that differentiate a particular example from another, and the implications of these distinct features.

### **When it comes to teaching, what do you consider to be the most challenging aspect?**

The most challenging aspect of teaching for me lies in finding the best way to push my students further, to help them consider each problem with a broader view. As such, I am particularly thankful for the students who mention that they feel encouraged by student presentations and by learning from showing their wrong answers.

On this topic, there are many types of 'mistakes' that students can make. For instance, a student's error may come from subconsciously replacing a hidden assumption made by the model with one that is closer to reality. This is not so much a matter of right and wrong - rather, it is a golden opportunity to nudge the student towards thinking about ways in which the model can be extended. After all, different assumptions are simply different ways to abstract reality. To see my students explore such questions, often of their own accord - these are the times that I find the most precious!

Again, a big part of helping students to consider each problem with a broader view lies in me learning how best to guide students when they present a wrong answer in tutorials. Often, I find that the responses that first come to my mind may lead students too quickly to the correct answer. If I were less eager, students may take longer to come to the correct answer but along the way come to learn more deeply about the subject. Finding the right balance in this sense is challenging, and often my students

will be left waiting while I try to think of the best response. I am very thankful to my students for their patience with me!

### **As a TA, what is the most significant lesson or key insight you have gained from your experience?**

The most significant lesson I have learned is the importance of communicating clearly by listening carefully. Especially if someone is struggling with content, each question that they ask is a precious opportunity. Instead of taking the question at face value, it is helpful to understand why they are asking that question. Following this, I must choose the right words so that they can best understand the topic at hand.

### **What are some interesting research projects that you have worked on?**

I am part of a team headed by Prof. Liu Chang working on creating a US state-level economic index that starts from the early years. There are currently no state-level GDP figures that stretch back to the 1870s. As such, we want to collect and digitize a host of variables that stretch back to the early years (for example, the number of potatoes produced in each state), and use some tricks to pull out the latent variables that are driving these time series. Working with historical data has its challenges, but there lies a thrill in uncovering some historical events or contexts that explain a particular pattern in the data. This is my first opportunity doing serious data work and I am very thankful for the opportunity to 'get my hands dirty'!

### **What are some things that you do for fun?**

I have recently been inspired to pick up playing the piano again. The piano I have at home isn't in great condition, but here's hoping that it will be restored back to full health soon!

I also quite enjoy playing some board games (in particular, those designed by Carl Chudyk). His games are often just a handful of cards, yet each card can be used in multiple (typically 4-5) ways. Every card is purposeful in a unique way - the true potential of a card may only reveal itself many games in. This idea is perhaps best captured in his game "Mottainai", a word which conveys the idea of not wasting things, but rather to respect and appreciate their value, and give them the time they need to reach their full potential.

Finally, one of my favorite things to do is to explore the various rooftops in NUS, to find some nice spots to admire the sunset!

### **What are some NUS Economics modules would you recommend students to take?**

I recommend taking EC3305R under Dr. Vu Thanh Hai. Dr. Vu's passion for programming shows clearly through his teaching, and his many dad jokes liven up each class! He is a very kind professor, who genuinely wants the best for each of his students. For curious folk, I would recommend taking EC5101R under Prof John Quah and Prof Luo Xiao. What I appreciated most about the course was the manner in which they manage to bring out the intuition behind the math. While others had told me about math telling a story, this was the first time that I experienced the two coming together so vividly.