

Teaching Dossier  
Elliott Isaac

**Undergraduate and Master's Teaching Philosophy**

I believe that each student learns in a different way. For example, some students more easily learn during lectures, whereas others better learn through problem solving. Therefore, I attempt to provide structure for different learning modes in the undergraduate and master's courses I teach. I do this by splitting these courses into lecture-based classes and group work-based classes. I introduce and scaffold the concepts in lecture and then provide time for in-class group worksheets to reinforce the concepts. The questions on each worksheet build upon each other so that the early questions reinforce the main concepts, and the subsequent questions push the students to think more critically about the concepts. I ask students to form in-class groups to work together on the worksheets so that students with different strengths can help each other build a stronger understanding of the material. I also walk around to each group to answer questions if they are stuck, but I try to ask the group members if anyone knows the answer to a question before answering it myself.

In Econ 3340 (Government and the Economy), Econ 4540 (Public Finance and Public Policy), and for my master's students, I also emphasize real-world examples of the economic concepts we discuss in class. In Econ 3340 I assign a weekly writing task where students submit a 1- to 2-page write-up of a recent news article and connect the situation to a topic we have discussed in class. These do not need to be obvious connections; for example, one student connected the idea of externalities to football.

In Econ 4540, I assign three in-class jigsaw literature review activities centering around different research questions connected to concepts from class. For example, two of the research questions we explored in Spring 2021 were "Does the minimum wage lower employment?" and

“What are the effects of joint vs. individual taxation?” In these activities, each student is assigned to read one out of three possible academic economics articles before class. In class, I first break them into groups in which each student read the same article. This group works together to summarize their article’s research question, empirical approach, and conclusions. Then I break the students into a different group in which each student read a different research article. This group takes turns outlining the article they read for their group members, and then works together on a deliverable to submit at the end of class. Early in the semester this deliverable is a worksheet of article summaries, and later in the semester the deliverable is a 1- to 2-page synthesis of the articles and their evidence. This jigsaw activity formed the basis of one of my publications, [2] **“Teaching Controversial and Contemporary Topics in Economics Using a Jigsaw Literature Review Activity,”** coauthored with Patrick Button, LaPorchia Collins, Augustine Denteh, Mónica García-Pérez, Benjamin Harrell, and Engy Ziedan. This paper has been accepted by the *Journal of Economic Education* (Impact Factor: 1.030; Ranked 452 by RePEc).

As more advanced students, I assign my master’s students referee reports throughout the semester. They can choose any two of the papers being presented in the Economics Department Seminar Series, and must summarize, critique, and provide suggestions to improve the paper, as they would during a regular peer review process. By connecting this assignment to the Seminar Series, I hope to include the master’s students in the department’s research environment and provide structure to their introduction to academic economic research. More broadly, each of the writing activities I use in my undergraduate and master’s classes helps connect the abstract concepts we discuss in class to situations that are familiar in the real world. I believe these connections to real-world situations helps round out each class, so that there is a balance between lecture, group work, and applications.

I also do my best to post all relevant course materials on Canvas in a timely manner, such as in-class worksheets, detailed answer keys, lecture slides, and lecture recordings. This helps students who were unable to attend class, who learn better by working through problems with supporting materials, or who want to refer to the worksheets while reviewing material.

Finally, some students learn more effectively by talking through questions or assignments. Therefore, I try to make myself as available as possible to answer questions throughout the semester through office hours or one-on-one appointments if necessary.

### **Doctoral Teaching Philosophy**

I have taught Econ 7760 (Public Finance I), which is a second-year doctoral field course. I view this course as the beginning of the student's inherently difficult transition from a consumer of economic research to a producer of economic research. I also believe that part of developing as an economist is learning how to be a strong presenter. However, presentation skills are often overlooked in graduate teaching in economics, and, as a result, students often struggle to successfully present their work in academic settings. I seek to provide structure for the student's development as an economist by encouraging their own exploration of the theoretical and empirical challenges in public finance. I do this by assigning a diverse set of academic articles, building in opportunities to practice academic presentations, and scaffolding the process of forming a research question.

I curate a list of suggested academic articles to highlight some of the best published work authored by a diverse group of economists, spanning several subfields of public finance, and involving a wide range of theoretical and empirical challenges. The breadth of the reading list is meant to provide starting points for the students to explore their own interests in each subfield (through the assigned articles we discuss in class), illuminate pathways for further reading (through

the other articles in that section of the reading list), and highlight empirical challenges and solutions that the student may encounter. As we discuss assigned articles in class, I orient the discussion around connecting theoretical predictions to empirical analysis and how the author convincingly (or, sometimes, unconvincingly) identifies the causal effect of interest.

For each of the articles we discuss in class, I also assign five-minute presentations to help students develop presentation skills. Students must construct presentation slides that concisely summarize the article, outline the empirical challenges, and provide feedback about how the article could be improved. These assignments serve two purposes. First, they help ensure that at least some students read the article in-depth before class. Second, they help students develop presentation skills through low-stakes assignments. I provide feedback on both their slides and their presentation so that they can improve throughout the semester. While we discuss the paper as a larger group, I attempt to connect the concepts back to the student's presentation.

I also assign a larger research project in which the student is expected to form their own research question, develop an empirical strategy, and begin data analysis. To scaffold this process, I break apart the assignment into manageable milestones throughout the semester. Students begin by proposing two potential projects in which they briefly pose a research question, an empirical strategy, and a data source for each. I provide feedback on these proposals, focusing on the feasibility of each project and potential challenges that they will need to address. I encourage students to use the reading list as a starting point because they may be interested in topics that we will not discuss in-depth until later in the semester. After the student has selected their project, the other milestones include two check-ins about their progress and next steps for the project, a written review of the related economic literature, and a final 25-minute presentation and question-and-answer session about their project and findings.

## Student Evaluations

My primary goal in pursuing a Ph.D. in economics was to teach. I therefore highly value the feedback I receive from student evaluations because they help me determine what went well and, more importantly, what I can improve. I emphasize the importance of course evaluations to my students and, as a result, have high response rates that vary between 88-95%.

Figure 1, below, displays my average scores on the questions “Overall, how would you rate this instructor?” (in blue) and “Overall, how would you rate this course?” (in red), as well as the Economics Department mean scores for those questions.<sup>1</sup> The figure shows that I have always been an above average instructor and that students have usually ranked my courses above average, relative to the respective Economics Department means.

Below I have selected some excerpts from the course evaluation free response questions:

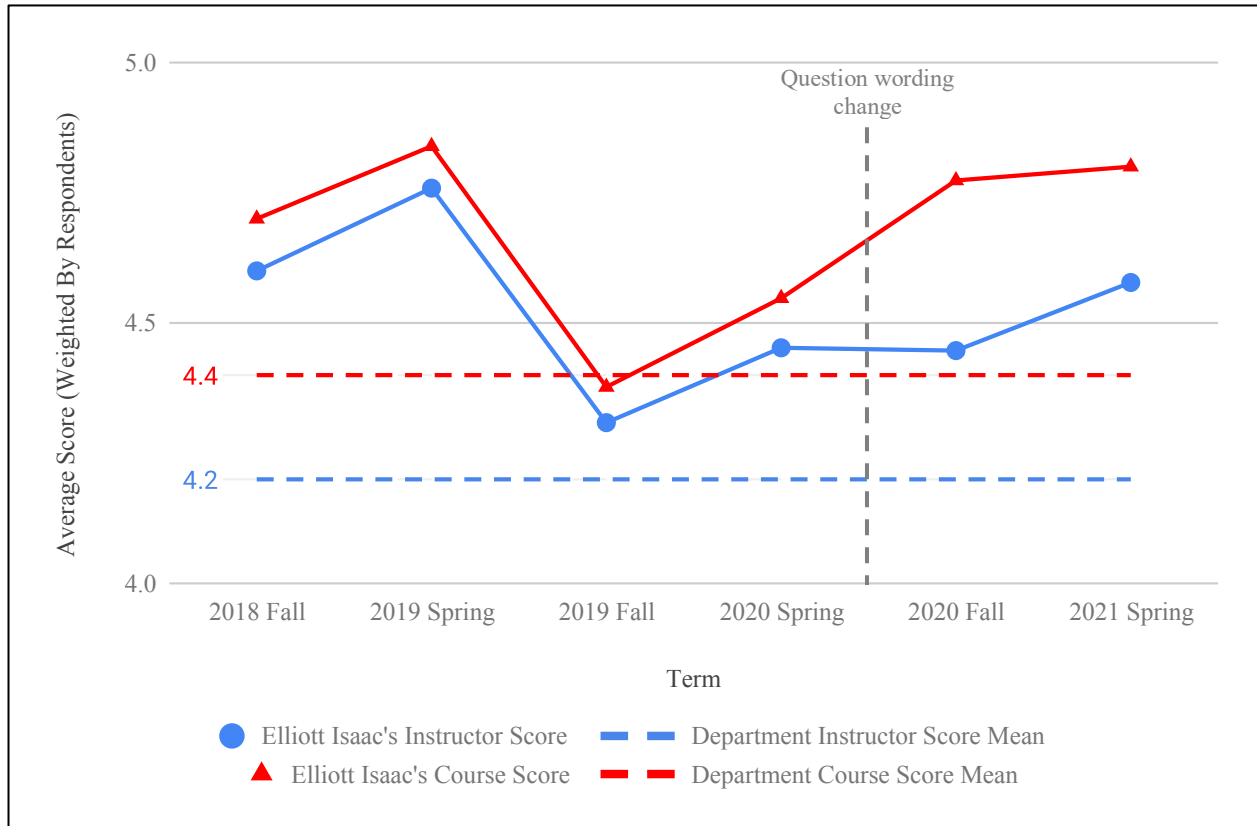
- “The instructor clearly explains concepts very well and then backs that up with worksheets that apply those concepts to real world problems.” – Fall 2019, Econ 3340
- “I truly feel that Dr. Isaac went above and beyond for his students, he cares about whether his class succeeds and treats everyone as a person and not a number, one of the only professors I have had who made an effort to learn each students’ name in order to interact with them on a first name basis during classes.” – Spring 2020, Econ 3010
- “Prof Elliot organized the course in a way that covered the most important elements required in a PhD student: research, presentation skills, critiquing abilities etc. His understanding of research is deep and thorough, his style of teaching focuses on the most important requirements of being a graduate student in economics and this was evident from the way he organized the course (presentations, referee reports, research check ins etc). He is approachable and I particularly appreciate the combination of intelligence, good teaching and humbleness and he has all these qualities.” – Fall 2020, Econ 7670
- “Professor Isaac is a top 10% professor at Tulane. He has a clear understanding of the material and chooses multiple ways to teach and engage the class. From day one he made it clear that he wanted to know the names of every student in the class by the second week

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<sup>1</sup> In Spring 2020, the University changed the wording to these questions from the above text to “Overall, I would recommend this instructor, Professor Elliott Isaac” and “Overall, I would recommend this course.” The University also changed the response options from “Excellent, Very Good, Average, Fair, or Poor” to “Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, or Not Applicable.” To maintain consistency across terms, I manually entered the original question wording and response options in Spring 2020 and report the averages in Figure 1, but all the questions and response options in Fall 2020 and later reflect the new wording.

of class. I think the course work is balanced and the work load is an appropriate amount.”  
– Spring 2021, Econ 4540/6540

Figure 1: Overall Instructor and Course Scores



*Notes:* The figure displays mean values of Overall Instructor and Overall Course scores for each semester, weighted by the fraction of responses coming from each course. The vertical axis runs from 4 to 5 for illustrative purposes only, to better display variation in scores over time. Course evaluation response rates varied between 88-95%. The Economics Department mean scores come from the Fall 2018 through Fall 2019 SmartEvals reports because the EvaluationKIT reports do not include department, division, or school means for each question. There is no variation in the Economics Department mean scores between Fall 2018 and Fall 2019. The vertical dashed line indicates when the question wording changed as described above.

### **Student Supervision**

I have supervised an Honors Summer Research Program project for Jonathan Ogawa in summer 2020. Jonathan continued with the project for his Honors Thesis, and I served as chair of his Honors Thesis committee in academic year 2020-2021. I am currently chair of Stone Agren's Honors Thesis committee, which he will complete in academic year 2021-2022. I am currently a second or third reader on the doctoral field paper committees for Farah Khan, Zehra Farooq, and Jingyi Zhang, and I am currently a second or third reader on the doctoral dissertation committees for Sean Larkin, Mary Penn, and Alexander Siebert.

### **New Courses Developed**

I proposed and developed a new course in spring 2019: Econ 4540/6540 Public Finance and Public Policy. This was at the request of James Alm (department chair at the time) and Jonathan Pritchett (undergraduate director at the time), who were interested in combining two existing courses (Econ 4520/6520 Economics of Public Expenditures and Econ 4530/6530 Economics of Taxation) into a single public finance course that covered both government expenditures and taxation. This new course complements Econ 3340 Government and the Economy.

**Course Title:** Public Finance & Public Policy

**Course Code:** ECON 4540 and ECON 6540

**Course Description:** An overview of the field of public finance and public policy. Topics include the rationale for government intervention in the economy, the efficiency, distributional, and revenue effects of taxation, and the evaluation of specific public policies

and tax instruments. ECON 6540 is the masters level equivalent, open to graduate students only. Prerequisite(s): ECON 3010 or 3030.

I have taught Econ 4540/6540 three times between fall 2019 and spring 2021. Although Econ 4540/6540 and Econ 3340 cover similar topics, I tier the difficulty and complexity of the economic analysis when I teach them. In Econ 3340, where the prerequisite is Econ 1010 (Introduction to Microeconomics), we focus on economic markets and how government intervention affects those markets. In Econ 4540/6540, where the prerequisite is Econ 3010 (Intermediate Microeconomics), we focus on how government intervention affects individual consumer and firm behavior, which, in turn, drive the economic market forces we observe.