

Teaching Statement

Benjamin King – University of Michigan

In my time at the University of Michigan, some of my most enjoyable semesters have been those in which I was appointed as a graduate student instructor. In this time I've learned that the students who come through classes bring a vast diversity in experiences, learning styles, and ways of approaching their work. A "one-size-fits-all" approach is not only frustrating for students, but fails to allow many hard-working, motivated students to reach their potential in the subject. It is an instructor's job to do his or her best to accommodate students with different needs.

I have had considerable experience teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate level. My most formative experience has been as the teaching assistant for Dragomir Radev in "Natural Language Processing," a project-based graduate-level course. During that time, Professor Radev was also teaching courses concurrently at Columbia University, so many of the responsibilities for course organization fell to me. I was responsible for holding office hours, answering students' questions, advising students on projects, writing assignments, and designing and delivering several lectures per semester. I've also served as an assistant for Dr. Radev, helping to organize and deliver an online course in natural language processing for the education platform Coursera. In whatever course I've been assigned to, the responsibilities of being a teacher have gone beyond what fits on a resumé, and include such things as helping students struggling with other classwork, encouraging them not to give up, acting as a character reference, and giving advice – academic, career, and even personal. My experiences as a student instructor have shaped my views of what it means to teach at the collegiate level.

My policies as an instructor have always been to accommodate students and be as flexible as possible. In all my time teaching, I've never had a student who was fundamentally incapable of understanding a concept. Different backgrounds and learning styles lead students to conceptualize in different ways, and a concept that is eluding a student may simply take three or four different explanations before it "clicks." With time in class being limited, I have a policy of holding regular office hours, staying as long over-time as I can when students are struggling, and scheduling meetings with students who are either not able to attend regular office hours or need further assistance. I try to ensure that students are understanding the concepts and not merely producing the correct answers. If exams and homeworks come back with many low scores, that is a reflection on my work as an instructor.

In addition to my course assignments, I've been able to participate in a number of outreach opportunities. As a graduate researcher, I found that communication between people doing natural language processing (NLP) research throughout the college was lacking, and so I founded and led an NLP reading group. This group drew students and faculty from many different departments and even a number of participants from outside the university. The NLP reading group is now in its fourth semester of regular meetings. Additionally, I've volunteered and worked with the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO) in many different roles. NACLO is a high school competition in which students solve puzzles in computational linguistics. I have written problems, reviewed problems, graded, and even designed the website for NACLO. I hope to be able to bring NACLO wherever I go, reaching out to local high school students and hosting a competition site.

I am qualified and eager to teach a number of courses, both at the undergraduate and graduate level. I also have significant experience with and would feel comfortable teaching courses in Natural Language Processing, Data Mining, Information Retrieval and Health Informatics, Machine Learning, or Network Theory.