Teaching Statement
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Born into a family of teachers, I have always been aware of the beauty of teaching. To me, teaching is a joyful and rewarding experience, where we watch the students grow and enjoy their every achievement. Teaching is also full of responsibilities, in which we are committed to help students grow from beginners into people with the right knowledge to fulfill their career goals. Teaching and interacting with students is one of the greatest attractions of an academic career for me.

1 Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy can be summarized into three aspects. First, I believe that a successful teaching style is built upon good interactions with students. Besides well organized course materials, one important factor for a course to be successful is whether it can inspire the interests of the students and motivate them to actively explore different solutions. Real-world examples and open questions always make a class more interesting to students. Instead of passive instruction, I would encourage students to ask questions, express their own ideas, and discuss alternative solutions. It is also important to be always aware of the needs and challenges of students and to adjust the teaching plan according to their feedback. Secondly, instead of pushing concrete knowledge to students, I’d like to emphasize more on the methodology of identifying research problems, acquiring essential knowledge, and finding effective solutions. The ultimate goal of my teaching is not to prepare students to be someone who memorizes every piece of knowledge in the text book, but to empower them with skills to create the knowledge in future text books. Thirdly, I strongly believe that the process of teaching is, at the same time, a great reinforcement of the process of learning. By carefully preparing for classes and learning from the feedback from students, there is a great opportunity to evaluate the knowledge that I am already familiar with. It provides a chance to question the statements that I previously assumed to be correct, to connect knowledge that I previously considered to be irrelevant, and to envision new research directions that I have never thought about.

2 Teaching Experience

My first teaching experience dates back to the year 2001, when I was a junior at Peking University, one of the top universities in China. I served as one of the instructors for a summer course, “Introduction to Computer Skills,” organized by the China Computer Federation to popularize computer techniques in an underdeveloped area of China. I gave four lectures in front of 120 attendants, who themselves were teachers from local high schools. It was a great pleasure to see the students learn, to answer their questions, and to share in their enthusiasm; all of which I had never experienced before. Encouraged by this experience, I volunteered to be the teaching assistant of an undergraduate course in Peking University one year later. In this introductory course of basic computer and web skills designed for non-CS major freshmen, it was my responsibility to supervise laboratory practices, which accounted for 40% of the credit hours. From these experiences, I learned that a good teacher must be able to adapt the way of explaining a concept to the knowledge level of students. These early experiences of teaching made me begin to think seriously about pursuing a career in academia, which was one of my most important reasons to study for a PhD in the United States.
Before coming to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), I spent one year in the PhD program of Vanderbilt University. I had the opportunity of being a teaching assistant for two courses at Vanderbilt. The first course was “Principles of Operation Systems,” a core course for upper-level undergraduates and graduate students. The second course was “Program Design and Data Structures,” a core course for lower-level undergraduates. In both courses, I was responsible for supervising lab experiments, grading homework and examinations, and holding office hours and review sessions. Directly interacting with students helped me understand the different strengths and difficulties of students in the United States versus students in China. Auditing the classes regularly also gave me a great opportunity to observe and learn from how professors in a prestigious US university organize course materials, give lectures, and interact with students. I had the opportunity to practice what I learned from these experiences, by giving two guest lectures for the course “Introduction to Text Information Management” at UIUC. The two lectures covered the area of probabilistic topic models, which was closely related to my own research. I carefully prepared for the lectures and interacted with quite a few students after each class in order to improve my teaching skills based on their feedback. Several students told me that they were inspired by my lectures, and would like to dig deeper into this research area. This was most rewarding to me.

Throughout my PhD study, I have been seeking every opportunity to improve my teaching skills. For example, in Vanderbilt, I enrolled in the International Teaching Assistant Program organized by the Center for Teaching and the English Language Center. There, I took weekly courses to improve my skills for classroom teaching. During these courses, I not only attended lectures and interacted with other teaching assistants, but also gave demo lectures twice a semester, which were videotaped and commented on by professional advisors. I was also paired with a personal undergraduate consultant, who regularly assisted me to understand the diversity of student learning styles and campus cultures. In addition, at UIUC, I am eagerly practicing to improve my presentation and teaching skills, by giving tutorials and talks at various seminars.

I have given many presentations at different conferences and seminars, and invited talks at universities and research labs. From these experiences, I obtained a greater understanding and appreciation of presenting deep technical materials clearly to an audience with different backgrounds and diverse interests. I have also got experiences with answering all sorts of technical, sometimes challenging questions. I believe that all such experiences will be helpful for my classroom lecturing.

3 Teaching Preference

I am confident in teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses. My solid academic training and research experiences enable me to design and teach courses on a wide range of topics. In particular, I would be willing to teach advanced undergraduate classes which target at developing skills for undergraduates, or junior graduate students, to cope with the changing world, such as information retrieval, data mining, machine learning, natural language processing, database systems, as well as artificial intelligence. I am also prepared to offer graduate courses and seminars that are related to my research interests, such as text information management, statistical data mining, and web informatics. My goal of a graduate course is to introduce to the students the beauty of research. I would thus emphasize on reading selected papers from top conferences, discussion about new research directions, collaborative projects based on open problems, as well as hands-on practice to develop research and presentation skills. I am also very interested in designing an advanced course that combines multiple disciplines to develop real world applications. It is also my plan to select and develop some of the course materials into a book.

In summary, I view teaching as an important part of my academic career. I look forward to the opportunity to teach both undergraduate and graduate courses as well as the opportunity to mentor the next generation computer and information scientists, helping them establish their careers in both academia and industry.