

Teaching Statement

Christopher League

The prospect of *teaching* has always been a key motivator for me in graduate school. Ever since I led review sessions on C++ as a senior at Johns Hopkins, I have been devoted to pedagogy. My successes as a TA and instructor at the University of Maryland assured me that I had chosen the right career path. Although my teaching fellowships at Yale did not involve regular sections, I still made an impact on students while concentrating on my dissertation research.

I have come to appreciate the value of research in *combination* with teaching. Exploring the frontier of knowledge, even in a narrow domain, can be humbling. I am reminded, painfully often, that I do not know everything! This sentiment helps me relate to students – even the *n*th time I teach a particular course. As Brandeis Professor Harry Mairson observed, “their frustration over not understanding and sometimes failing is our jointly suffered occupational hazard.” Participating in research can add new perspective to known results. I begin to see “textbook knowledge” as the fruits of the labor and inspiration of real people, who struggled with their ideas just as I struggle with mine. Sharing this perspective with students can add drama and human interest to an otherwise dry lecture. Teaching informs research as well, by forcing us to distill ideas to their very essence, and to convey their importance to a broad audience.

With experience, I have identified several personal attributes that enhance my teaching. First, *passion* for the subject comes easily, even when topics are somewhat distant from my own research interests. Second, I *listen carefully* to students when they ask and answer questions. Some of my colleagues will repeat an explanation many times without getting through – not surprising, since the communication is unidirectional. I found that students will, often without knowing it, indicate precisely what is giving them trouble. Finally, I am *patient* and *persistent* when students do not grasp everything right away; I keep trying as long as they do.

I embrace the diversity of my students, not only in the usual dimensions (gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation, for example) but also in the myriad other ways that people differ: confidence, learning style, age, background, and outside interests, to name a few. At Maryland, I designed and taught a summer programming course as part of a college-wide effort to improve retention of minority students in engineering. In my section for Operating Systems, a deaf student brought along a sign language interpreter; during office hours, we communicated by typing messages at the computer. Everyone brings something unique to the educational enterprise. My role is to fashion a learning environment that is engaging from a multiplicity of perspectives.

Since not every student will immediately share my fascination for the more abstract ideas of cs, I motivate every topic with concrete examples. While a “discussion circle” is not really appropriate for most courses in this field, I try nonetheless to break up lectures with periods of active learning in small groups. I assign problems that highlight the heart of some technique, but augment them with lighter, confidence-building exercises. I design projects that are relevant to modern computing applications and paradigms.

I solicit feedback from students early and often, so that (1) their views help me adjust the course *before* it ends, and (2) in the end, I attain a fair sample of evaluations throughout the course, not overly biased by end-of-term frustrations such as the final project or exam. I believe strongly in attending teaching workshops and education conferences, to share and to learn best practices with my peers, and to strengthen my own skills and conviction. At Yale, I participated in “Becoming Future Faculty in the Sciences,” a program that prepared me for the pedagogical issues that new professors face.

Sample student reviews

2001 Brenda Ng, a former Yale student, wrote this recommendation specifically for my application. She is now a second-year doctoral student in Computer Science at Harvard University.

“Christopher League shows tremendous promise as a brilliant educator. I met Chris during my senior year at Yale, when he was the teaching fellow for a compiler class in which I was enrolled. Not only was Chris a very effective and passionate teaching fellow, he also gave me much inspiration and direction outside the classroom. Chris advised me on my choice of graduate school and gave me one-on-one tutorials on advanced computer science topics in preparation for the Computer Science GRE. Moreover, he was beyond a mere teaching fellow, he was a friend and a role model. During times when my projects or life decisions did not pan out, I could always poke my head into Chris’s office and he was always ready to offer technical, professional, and friendly advice. I strongly believe that Chris’s brilliance and motivation will continue to awe and to inspire his students and he will make an invaluable educator and researcher in your institute.” — bmng@eecs.harvard.edu

1996 For *Computer Science I*, an introductory programming course at University of Maryland, I helped evaluate assignments, and met many students in my daily office hours. The following testimony is from an anonymous end-of-term course review.

“Chris League was the **ideal** TA. He was clear, knowledgeable, polite. He spoke English and communicated effectively. He listened, he answered questions, he clarified confusing issues, he made me feel like I stood a chance when [the instructor’s] poorly written assignments were raining crap all over my November. Chris was the best thing about this course, and if he was this good without trying, I would love to see how he would do if he did try. I sincerely hope he is considering teaching as a profession, because he was better as a TA than most of my professors were as professors.”

1995 As a senior at Johns Hopkins, I led optional weekly review sessions for *Intermediate Programming in C++*. This blurb was printed in the *Oraculum*, a student-run course evaluation guide:

“Chris League’s sections were run brilliantly, excellently complementing the lectures.”

Supervisor review

1998 After moving to Yale, I received this letter from the Dean of the College of Computer, Math, and Physical Sciences (CMPS) at the University of Maryland. Apparently some of my former students acknowledged me at their college awards ceremony.

Dear Mr. League:

Please allow me this opportunity to add my thanks to those expressed by students who were honored at our *Celebrating Excellence* event last week. Certainly, our educational mission is of paramount importance and the successes of our students in this regard have profound effects on the College and the University.

The positive and lasting impressions you have made on your students will, ultimately, be to the benefit of us all. With deep appreciation for a job well done, I am very truly yours.

Richard H. Herman; Dean, CMPS.