Teaching Statement

I primarily teach graduate level statistics courses, which is both challenging and enjoyable. The materials tend to be very dense and difficult to grasp. Accordingly, much of my teaching style capitalizes on slowly building materials, grounding ideas in application, and relating these techniques to the research of the students and faculty attending the course. For example, I have found that mastering and then regularly revisiting the basic principles, or building blocks, for statistics can provide a foundation for understanding very complicated ideas. Using these, I can often teach techniques that would otherwise be beyond the grasp of students. My graduate courses on structural equation modeling, dynamical systems theory, and nonlinear analytic techniques use this approach to communicate the underlying theory and math of advanced materials rather than only learning how to make an application provide output. I supplement this with regular assignments, readings, and handouts so that the students are practiced in their use and interpretation with knowledge of where to go for refreshers and more advanced ideas. This method seems to be successful (having received two teaching awards and positive comments from a number of former students who are now faculty elsewhere), though there is always room for improvement.

It is also worth noting that a number of years ago I had to take over the first year of graduate statistics training (teaching one semester and overseeing another). This resulted in needing to teach more than the required number of courses to keep our graduate training afloat for several years (which is no longer true as of our quantitative hires). It also resulted in giving up teaching undergraduate courses since that event. That is about to change. Now that we have hired Brian and Pascal I am having freedom to teach undergraduate course for the first time in a decade and should be able to do so every 2-4 years.

As a mentor, I have had limited success in attracting students who fit nicely into my cluster of interests (dynamical systems and quantitative who can exist in the social area). For those whom I have been primary advisor, most have gone on to a successful career (Vallejos, MS working in industry; Vaughn Ph.D. Associate Professor SDSU; Story, Ph.D. working in industry; Wiltshire, post-doc, Assistant Professor Tilburn; Wong, post-doc, Assistant Professor Chico State). Asher Munion is my only current student soon to finish and had one in person interview for a tenure track position. So, much of my mentoring is with students whom I am not the primary advisor. This occurs in two capacities: as a systems theorist and as a primary statistics trainer. However, my approach to mentoring is the same regardless. When someone walks into my office it is an opportunity. It is an opportunity for collaboration, an opportunity to learn something, an opportunity to teach. I love what I do and I assume that those I mentor love what they do too. It does not matter if their love is not my love. Through our interactions something new and better comes out of it. I mentor from a place of respect. But I also mentor from the view that we do not need to agree. We need to communicate. I assume that a mentee is self-motivated through their love of the topic and thus my style often comes across as laissez-faire. I do not see it as such, as when I am mentoring a clinical student, for example, I have little to no clinical expertise and must make sure our interactions properly reflect that. The reality is complex thinking (e.g. dynamical systems) and good quantitative training gets students jobs. So, I try to bring these skills to the table to enable these future jobs to happen even if I will never get the credit.