

The Loneliest Teacher

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The high school economics teacher may be the loneliest of all faculty members. Her students expect her to answer convoluted questions concerning a complex field in which she may have little or no background. While other teachers might make similar claims, the economics teacher may be uniquely vulnerable. Her books and other resources will provide few answers (or clues on how to obtain answers) to many of her students' questions. And the economics teacher often faces a painfully small network of cohorts on whom to lean for assistance. To do her job well requires an effort that few if any other teachers have to put forth.

The good news is there are outstanding resources available for economics teachers—but you have to know where to find them. The end of this article suggests where to start.

Lonely in What Way?

In the lower grades, economic education focuses heavily on life skills—making change, saving and investing for the future, opening a bank account, starting a business, and so forth. In these areas, there is no shortage of available resources or buttonholeable experts and semi-experts. But as the student enters high school, the focus in econ ed shifts toward the core of economics—supply and demand, marginal analysis, opportunity cost, and the complexities of the world economy. In this realm, the teacher may feel alone at sea.

Let's make this a bit more concrete. January 15, 1998, a student recounts three items from the morning business pages: (1) slower sales in Asian markets by American businesses; (2) strong Christmas 1997 sales by American retailers; and (3) a strong upward move on the Dow Jones industrial average. What, the student asks, does this combination of events bode for U.S. employment in the next quarter?

The teacher can respond in a number of ways:

1. Plead ignorance—a risky strategy with bloodthirsty high schoolers;
2. Pluck a bogus number out of thin air. ("Together, they mean an increase in employment growth of 3.6%. Why? Because I'm smart and you're not. Next question.");
3. Reminisce about having been at Woodstock, and forget to answer the question;
4. Take a page from North Carolina basketball coach Dean Smith—go into a four corners strategy and try to run out the clock; and
5. Promise to get back with an answer tomorrow.

In many disciplines, option (5) would be a good strategy. Asked why Rome fought Carthage, the history teacher can look that evening in his encyclopedia. Asked about black holes, the physics teacher can remove the shrink-wrap from the Stephen Hawking book on his coffee table. Asked about the molecular structure of viruses, the chemistry teacher can ask the question at the Science Department meeting; if that strategy fails, she can probably ask some local physicians or pharmacists or corporate chemists for advice.

Faced with the student's question of January 15, though, the economics teacher may find little value in a day's delay. The encyclopedia will cast no light. Economics texts will provide no easy recipes. There may be no other economics teacher in the school—or even in the whole city or county—who can offer help. The teacher may not be personally acquainted with any economists.

Why So Lonely?

What makes the economics teacher more isolated than most of her peers? First, in most places, economic education is a relative newcomer. In a given school, all of the teachers will have studied English, history, geography, arithmetic, and social studies in their own school days. Many or most will have studied biology, chemistry, physics, and algebra. But there may no more than a smattering of teachers who ever had more than one or two economics courses in college—if that.

Second, she may be the only economics teacher in the school. While the econ teacher may be part of a larger department, there may be no other colleagues knowledgeable in the subject. This would also mean no on-site mentor to guide the new teacher (or the experienced one, for that matter) in the ways of the subject.

Third, more than with most other disciplines (history being a possible exception), economics is a subject in which fact and logic freely intermingle with opinion and truism. It is a field in which the public's preconceived notions can be especially powerful barriers to systematic exploration—it's tough teaching to folks who think they already know all the answers.

Finally, among the quantitative disciplines, economics may offer the fewest mathematical relationships that can be viewed in isolation, at least as practical approximations to truth. The physics teacher will be fairly accurate in predicting that a steel ball will accelerate at a rate of 32 feet per second per second. The chemistry teacher can measure out a mole of carbon and say with some assurance that there are close to 6.023×10^{23} atoms in the pile. The biology teacher can explain why a child of two Tay-Sachs carriers will have a 25% chance of developing the disease. While economic logic contains a great deal of mathematical specificity, it rarely yields up a neat number or an easily explainable, predictable relationship that clearly demonstrates the magic of the underlying equations.

What's the Result?

Loneliness has its costs, including the following:

- With few written guides or proximate peers, even a highly conscientious economics teacher can impart a lot of erroneous information.
- The latecomer to economic logic (as are many or most economics teachers) may be behind the curve in absorbing the most effective pedagogical tricks that economics has to offer. So reaching the students may be harder than is necessary.
- The daunting nature of economic pedagogy can lead the teacher to retreat into the superficial. Rather than teaching how the Federal Reserve controls inflation, she may have students memorize the cities in which Feds are located. Instead of exploring the impacts of public debt on the economy, she may ask students to memorize the amount of debt outstanding today. Instead of learning the economic rationale for corporations, the students may learn only a list of the 10 biggest companies in America.

- The special problems of teaching economics lead many to avoid the subject altogether, thus constricting the pool of knowledgeable teachers who might otherwise help one another to teach the subject.

Where's the Help?

There are vast resources poised to relieve the economics teacher's loneliness. The best way to begin tapping into these resources is to become involved with some of the many economic education organizations that serve teachers. These organizations provide access to print and electronic resources, to new and better pedagogical techniques, to knowledgeable economic specialists, and—perhaps most importantly—to a huge network of K-12 teachers on whom to call. For help, all the teacher has to do is ask.