An Economics Methods Course?
Challenges of Teaching an Economics Education Methods Course for Secondary Social Studies Preservice Teachers

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A recent front page of the New York Times contained stories about the structural problems of integrating Hong Kong into the mainland political-economic system and about a U.S. federal appeals court ruling that states may encourage Medicare recipients to use lower-cost generic drugs over the objections of the pharmaceutical industry. Each is an economic story—the People’s Republic of China’s seemingly syncretic combination of market economy and autocratic government, and the proper distribution of the burden of drug costs among pharmaceutical firms, patients, HMOs, and the state. Both have an important impact on national life and require economic understanding. Yet, surveys of adults and high school students point to large gaps in understanding standard economic principles through which these important issues are often analyzed and interpreted (Gleason and Van Scyoc 1995; National Council on Economic Education [NCEE] 2005; Walstad and Soper 1988). Often it is in social studies classrooms that students first learn to analyze and interpret these situations through an economic lens.

Social studies education, according to the curriculum standards of the National Council for the Social Studies (1994), promotes civic competence and the development of informed and reasoned democratic citizens. Put another way, social studies is the “integration of social science and humanities concepts for the purpose of problem-solving and decision-making for developing citizenship skills on critical social issues” (Barth in Dalgaard 1993, 17). The coordinated, systematic study of economics serves these purposes, as evidenced by the placement of economics as one of the ten strands in the NCSS standards: “Strand VII: Production, Distribution, and Consumption.” Thus, economics literacy is integral to the larger goal of social studies educators of creating democratic citizens (VanFossen 2005). Fifteen states currently require the completion of an economics course for high school graduation. The four states with the largest number of students enrolled in public schools (California, Texas, New York, and Florida) all require that students complete a course in economics before graduating from high school (NCEE 2005). In total, nearly 45 percent of high school students nationally are required to take at least a half-year course in economics for graduation (NCEE 2005; Walstad and Rebeck 2000), which makes it the fourth-highest in terms enrollment for a social studies course behind U.S. history (95 percent), civics (78 percent), and world history (59 percent) (Walstad and Rebeck). Moreover, other signs of greater prominence for economics education on the curricular map include the inclusion of economics questions on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests later this decade (National Center for Education Statistics 2004) and extensive funding in No Child Left Behind (2001) for K–12 economics education.

Despite the significance and impact of economics education, it remains underemphasized in many secondary social studies preservice programs (Salemi, Saunders, and Walstad 1996; VanFossen 2000; Walstad 1992). This has been a historical trend as well. For example, Galambos, Cornett, and Spitler (1985) reported that preservice social studies teachers on average completed only four credit hours of economics coursework. These four credit hours represented less than 7 percent of the total social science hours required for certification. Further-
more, given the varied and immense demands on the general social studies methods course, methods instructors, at best, might spend one session on teaching economics. This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs because the use of an economic lens in the study of social studies is indispensable. As a result, the education of preservice social studies teachers to teach economics is inadequate at best. To overcome this inadequacy, economics education must become a priority in secondary social studies preservice teacher education programs with the end goal of preparing active, economically literate citizens. Unfortunately, there exists a dearth of studies on effective practices in economic education for preservice teachers as confirmed by a survey of journals in social studies education, economics, and economic education.

Many discussions of preservice economics education advocate that preservice teachers take workshops at Centers of Economic Education located at universities, which are affiliated with the NCEE (see Schober 1984). However, such workshops are often isolated from the rest of the social studies program and not conducted jointly with social studies faculty (Mackey, Glenn, and Lewis 1977).

Methods courses, the mainstays of preservice teacher education in social studies, are curiously understudied in general terms although there are numerous focused studies on such topics as methods textbooks (Stanley 1984), problem-based learning (Hughes, Sears, and Clarke 1998), and critical thinking (Dinkelman 1999), including an issue focused on reflections on the methods course in the International Social Studies Forum (volume 3, no. 1, 2003). Broader studies that attempt to survey the field and make generalized findings are lacking.

What economics education preparation does exist for preservice social studies teachers comes from the general social studies methods course, special teacher sections of economic principles courses, and economics methods courses taught by economics faculty (Joshi 2003). Each of these variations provides differences in emphasis among economics content, general pedagogy, and what Shulman (1987) termed “pedagogic content knowledge” (PCK), the ways of representing and formulating the subject that makes it comprehensible to students. Emphasizing the ability of teachers to make multiple representations, Darling-Hammond (1997) has remarked that PCK requires teachers to “see ways that ideas connect across fields and to everyday life, so that they can select and use meaningful examples, problems, and applications” (295). Unfortunately, Sosniak (1999) writes that the conversation around PCK “has not congregated around a set of common understandings and findings” (195). Nevertheless, PCK holds great value for preservice teacher education and is best understood within the individual content domains.

Unfortunately, no research exists that analyzes efforts to improve preservice teachers’ capacity for PCK in economics education. In this article we define PCK for economics teachers and explore how it may be taught.

Curricular Decisions

At the outset, we had to decide on three dimensions of the methods course: (1) the extent to which the course would focus on an infusion approach rather than a stand-alone approach, (2) how we were going to conceive economic content, and (3) how we were going to teach economics-appropriate pedagogy. Because we teach in New York, one of the states that requires a half-year course in economics, we thought it would be advantageous to divide the course focus evenly among a stand-alone portion before the infusion portion so that we would be able to focus on economic concepts first and then apply them later in both U.S. and world history.

Our general organizing principle for choosing between a content-focus and a pedagogical-focus was not to attempt to teach all economic theory and history, but to focus on the most important (those concepts that had the widest utility) and to work pedagogical depth into the teaching of each of these core concepts.

Our Conception of Content

The nature of the content remains the thorniest issue in an economics methods course and involves understanding the purpose of teaching a general high school economics course. Unfortunately, a healthy debate around the “proper” purposes of teaching economics education has taken place sporadically at best in the economics education and social studies literature. This deflection on the part of both social studies education scholars generally and economic educators specifically has occurred for different reasons. In the case of social studies scholarship, little has been written about the purposes of teaching economics education for two reasons: in general, economics education has occupied little space on the social studies curricular table and most social studies educators have had little background in economics (Weidenaar in Mackey, Glenn, and Lewis 1977; Weidenaar 1980).

In the case of economic educators, the majority of whom are academic economists, they have simply submerged the question of purposes by holding what the majority of economists believe to be economics principles should be the curriculum for students (Siegfried and Meszaros 1998). For neoclassical (pro free market) economists, the discipline should parallel the physical sciences, in which the most recent findings should trump previously held ones.

By contrast, as teacher educators, we were interested in urging our students to think deeply about their own teaching, and we turned to a recent review of the literature for aims in high school economics education (Joshi 2005) for structure. It found four purposes of economics education for citizenship:

1. Decision making: to help students make macro (public issues) and micro (personal finance) decisions
were examined, including supply and demand, elasticity, the microeconomic concept of market structures (such as monopoly and oligopoly), financial markets (stock and bond), and macro-economic concepts of output (GDP), prices, employment, and trade. While these are fairly standard topics, we made it a point to "move up" the ladder of context—to go from supply and demand to political economy, in the case of rent controls, to examine the underlying notion of economic rights.

In the case of infusion into U.S. history, the themes of market dynamics, technology, legal systems, and the intersection with culture were of primary importance. Economic "hot spots" in U.S. history, for example, included triangle trade, antebellum sectionalism, business cycles, the Great Depression, and supply-side economics. The portion of the course devoted to infusing economic content into world history looked at such hot spots as the development of currency, the Silk Road, capital formation in Western Europe, and modern economic globalization.

**Our Conception of Pedagogy**

The one area where there has been a virtual flurry and broad consensus is in both social studies and economics education is theorizing and testing "active" methods of teaching. Such teaching methods, in the case of economics education, include simulations, experiments (see Brock and Lopus 2004), interactive computer exercises, various kinds of games, and the use of graphical informational systems and the like in creating maps of economic data. Constructivism is the preferred form of pedagogy in both progressive economics education and high school social studies classrooms for the straightforward reason that economic concepts such as scarcity, markets, and fractional reserve banking are dynamic and best understood in action through experience and that students, in having fun, are more engaged by such methods (Becker and Watts 2001; Benzing and Christ 1997; Joseph 1970; Morton and Rezny 1971).

Although a majority of introductory economics classrooms may not primarily use active methods, professional journals and teacher educators continue to press for the use of such methods. As such, the *Journal of Economic Education* is replete with articles and discussion on the ways in which stated economics concepts might be brought to life, especially in the section titled "Economics Instruction," which appears in every issue. For example, Laney (2001) presents a good summary for the case of using "active" methods, which he terms "experience-based instruction." Experience-based instruction is noted to have the following advantages:

1. Emphasizes active learning rather than passive learning
2. Promotes greater learning through personal experience than vicarious experience
3. Bearing the consequence of one's actions leads to greater learning

Two prominent types of experience-based instruction are role-playing and simulations. Role-playing allows students to learn by taking on others' perspectives, often through play and drama. For example, in examining the issue of progressive income taxes, students can take on the positions of high-, middle-, and low-income earners to better understand their viewpoints. Simulations (which simplify real-world conditions into workable models) allow students to gain understanding often through live competitions such as stock market simulations. Any examination of the curricular materials available through virtually any economics education advocacy group, of any political stripe, such as the NCEE, JumpStart, United for a Fair Economy, or Junior Achievement reinforces this view.

In addition to simulations and games, we lectured; held class discussions; conducted document jigsaws; worked with graphs, charts, and tables; varied grouping; used primary and secondary documents; held formal debates; and brought in guest speakers. In addition, we included class assignments in which students were required to present a major economic thinker's ideas, to analyze eco-
nomics curriculum for both pedagogy and ideology, and, as a culminating activity, to create a set of simulations and activities such that they could be used for multiple ideas, in the case of a stand-alone course, or could be used in a variety of ways.

A typical class would begin with a class activity, followed by a detailed debriefing of the activity's pedagogy and connection to content learning. For example, the first day of the course begins with a simple but useful activity. The instructor takes out a packet of M&Ms candy and puts it on a desk. The class is asked to divide the candy however they wish in five minutes and record the proceedings of any discussion about this distribution. The instructor leaves the classroom for a few minutes and then returns to find out how the M&Ms were divided and the rationale for the decision. As it might be imagined, distributions can range from a "free-for-all" to a supervised equal distribution. The chosen method of distribution is written on the board, and alternatives to that method are elicited. Typical additions include "might makes right," "the hungriest should get them," "equal distribution," "make a line—first come, first serve," "lottery," and so forth. The list is then extended by prompting students to cite examples in history for additional criteria for resource distribution such as primogeniture, caste, and markets.

The instructor then brings in Heilbronner's (1985) analysis that there are, in his opinion, only three primary systems of distribution: command, tradition, and markets. Students are then asked to group the methods on the board into those three categories and see if any of their suggestions remain outside Heilbronner's tripartite structure. The aim is to open students' thinking toward the many possibilities inherent in economic decision making and the inherent issue of values embedded in those possibilities. In terms of the two-tiered content approach, the activity introduces the standard definition of economics as a system to allocate scarce resources, but then goes on to show how the systems are socially, culturally, historically, and ideologically situated. After all, there are deeper notions of fairness underlying each of the different methods of distribution. Pedagogically, we used active methods by getting students to interact with one another on some "real" task, and we conducted an activity that the teachers themselves could use in an actual high school classroom.

We believe this class activity exhibits PCK on our behalf as it represents the idea of scarce resources in a form that is educationally accessible (in the form of M&Ms) and that this activity allows the instructor to connect student-generated methods of distribution to scholarly analysis of economic thought. In this way, we endeavored to present at least one example of PCK to students in every class session. But, as mentioned earlier, our ambition extended to trying to teach PCK to our students. Besides modeling good lessons that reflected PCK, we asked students, in formal debriefs of the lessons, to identify "levers" or decision variables internal to the activities that could be modified and asked them how they would modify them for their own use.

During the debriefing, students are asked to identify levers—such as kind of candy used, number of M&Ms given out, time given for deliberation, or whether or not the instructor steps out of the room—to set them for their particular school context and to comment on each others’ viewpoints. Thus, students should be able to identify the "number of M&Ms given out" as the key lever in the activity. If the M&Ms are set greater or equal to the number of students, the scarcity condition is not reached. In addition to modeling PCK and debriefing class activities, our culminating assignment also provided an opportunity for students to learn and display PCK by creating five activities or a two-week unit plan and providing a rationale for the connection of the content to the pedagogy. At the end of the course, students shared these activities. As might be expected, we keenly felt the trade-off between increased content breadth versus pedagogical debriefing depth.

Lessons Learned

After reflecting on courses taught, talking with students, and reading course evaluations and course surveys, we have come to three insights. The first is that students tended to equate economics with neoclassical economics, a philosophy that emphasizes a laissez-faire free market system. Students often wished to merely understand "how the economy worked" and did not recognize the ideological underpinnings in this objective. For example, one student stated:

I really liked the unit assignment and the first half of the course that dealt with economic concepts, like supply/demand, opportunity cost, utility, elasticity, command and market economy. It gave me the footing I needed to be an economics teacher.

We found this curious given that other courses in our social studies education program foster a critical/skeptical stance toward curriculum. It may have been due to the fact that few of the students had had any economics courses or had retained little from previous courses (reflecting national patterns, see NCES data as cited in Walstad [1992] and Walstad and Rebeck [2000]), thus contributing to their uncritical approach.

The second insight is that the development of PCK in social studies teachers may require more subject matter exposure than has been previously thought. This is not only the case in terms of principles and concepts such as supply and demand but, more structurally, in terms of quantification. One student explained that she saw the need to "spend more time at the beginning reviewing basic economics course content and going over economics course content to be used in a full year economics course." Another student asked for more diagnostic exams and quizzes to judge how much they need to learn, while several others advocated the use of an economics textbook.

There was also great hesitation in using quantitative language or analysis (beyond percentages) among far too many students. This implies that social studies teacher educators must them-
themselves have some economics or quantitative background to contend with student anxiety in teaching any such economics methods course. Part of the explanation for why students who had math and economic anxieties would enroll in such a course lies in the fact that almost all the students saw the course as helping their history teaching, as few students had ambitions for teaching the stand-alone course in economics.

A third and final insight is that we used standards from organizations that promoted economics education as well as New York State standards in helping our teachers better understand what is important to know in economics. While organizational and professional association standards were relatively clear about their aims and curricular emphases, New York State standards were much less clear. Students found it difficult attempting to fulfill what they saw as the state mandate for teaching economics and fell back on professional or organizational standards (such as those of the NCEE, NCSS, United for a Fair Economy, and so forth). One student recommended that future course sections should “specifically go over the standards set by the NCEE and make sure that everyone understands them. This could be done in a jigsaw activity.” This seemed to confirm our concern that “aims talk” be infused in our methods course, since state standards would not provide coherent aims and professional and organizational standards and material would sometimes have contradictory aims.

**Future Questions**

As the area of methods courses in social studies in general, and economics education courses in particular are under-researched, there are ample directions for fruitful research. One line of future research is the following up of teachers into the classrooms to see how they are making sense of economics concepts in either stand-alone or history courses. To what extent do they tend to stay in those topics that were explicitly discussed in the course and to what extent to they attempt new topics? A second line of future research would ask how economics should be handled in the regular social studies methods course, even if it is segregated to a single session. It has been argued here that active methods are the best approach toward teaching economics. A third line of research would investigate how best to aid preservice teachers in the creation of such active classroom methods. Further investigations will make it possible for all social studies educators to incorporate economics in our teaching as we strive to create democratic citizens.

**Key words:** economics education, methods courses, pedagogic content knowledge, preservice teachers, secondary social studies

**NOTES**

1. There is little reason to think why this situation has changed in the intervening years.

2. We define citizens as those who are prepared to deal with rapid change: complex local, national, and global issues; cultural and religious conflicts; and the increasing interdependence of nations in a global economy. For our democracy to survive in this challenging environment, students should understand, respect, and uphold the values enshrined in our founding documents and should leave school with a clear sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Further, citizens are prepared to challenge injustice and to promote the common good (NCSS 1994).

**REFERENCES**


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