Crafting Economics to be Relevant in the Lives of At-Risk Students

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Abstract

The teaching of economics to secondary education students can be a challenging endeavor for even the most seasoned professional. Conveying the concepts of this discipline are more difficult when working with “at risk” students. This article examines the “at risk” student and how economics can become more meaningful in their education and applied to their lives. Additionally, the role of cooperative education is infused as a means of augmenting student involvement.

We believe that it is possible to teach economics to “at-risk” students in away that is both meaningful to them and at the same time academically challenging. Who are “at risk” students? Slavin describes a student as "at risk" as one who is in danger of failing to achieve his or her educational level. Typical characteristics of “at risk students” include one or more of the following characteristics: low achievement, retention in grade, behavior problems, poor attendance, low socioeconomic status, and attendance at schools with large numbers of poor students (Slavin 1989).

Basically, “at risk” students are typically the ones who don’t want to be in class and often times cause the teachers problems. They act out in negative ways to get the teacher off track and to make themselves the center of attention. By forcing the teacher to discipline them they divert attention from the class objectives to themselves. Pushing the teachers stress “buttons” will be quite entertaining for most students even the one’s that want to learn the subject. These occurrences take place because the material is beyond their understanding or they fail to make a meaningful connection to their own lives. For example, it would be pointless to teach these students the backward bending supply curve for labor or the kinked demand curve for an oligopoly. If these topics are too esoteric to teach these pupils then what should be taught to them in economics.

Keeping in mind that those who find it dull have called economics the “dismal science”, it can be an exciting part of a social studies program (VanSickle, 1990) even for those whom we identify as “at risk”. Motivational factors normally identified by most students to all learning include the following: curiosity, good grades, goal-attainment of the learner, acquisition of knowledge, and desire of positive feedback. In the case of “at

risk" students, Carol S. Dweck (1989) conceptualized motivation as a function of three key judgments that students make. The first she termed goal value judgment or in terms of a student question: How important is this for me to learn? If students consider lessons to have no personal value they will respond negatively to this question. Next, she identified means value judgment or the following: How do I feel about participating in this learning process? If students perceive an experience to be threatening, burdensome, or boring their motivation to act in accordance with the planned objectives will diminish. Lastly, Dweck presents goal expectancy judgment in which the student poses the following to him/herself: If I try, how likely am I to be successful and achieve the goal? Additionally, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) identify in their suggestions for "best practices" for all students in Social Studies lessons the need for active participation, an important element of cooperative learning, to build skills and habits for lifelong, responsible learning, and learning to be built upon students' prior knowledge of their lives and communities, rather than assuming they know nothing about the subject. We believe that these characteristics of "best practices" lessons are particularly effective when utilized with an "at risk" student population.

We believe that these students have all played two economic roles in their lives. They all have at various times been producers and consumers. These experiences can be used to develop lessons in economics. From these known beginnings it is feasible to lead the student to an understanding of all basic economic ideas necessary to be a good consumer and producer in the economic paradigm of our capitalist system. Borrowing from the philosophy of John Dewey in his work *Experience and Education:*

It is a cardinal precept of the newer school of education that the beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have; that this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning (Dewey 1936).

Dewey believed that the starting point for education should be the students' innate experiences. The teacher should cultivate these experiences and take the student from the known to the unknown. This can be done in economics by discussing the pupils' role as consumers. On the first day of class the teacher student exposition can be on what the students purchased since they got up in the morning. A list could be made of these items and then the discussion could turn to price paid for them. Did you get the best product for the best price would be a logical and meaningful inquiry? The students keeping a consumption journal of what they buy and how much they pay for the items could verify the laws of supply and demand,. Eventually, the class could discuss supply, demand and equilibrium price.

Once the role of consumer has been developed, the teacher can then turn to the producer role. Many secondary school students have jobs of some type. They could discuss their jobs and the conditions of their work. When the conversation evolves to gross and net pay the question is often asked: "What happened to my pay check?" The answer to this question could consume several class periods in which taxation, retirement and social security could be presented and explained. A concluding exercise on the producer side could be to have the students fill out and file their income tax either hypothetically or for real.

Later in the course other activities could be planned such as comparison shopping, check accounts, balancing checkbooks and negotiating loans. A visit to the local bank could be a cumulating activity. While at the bank the representative of the institution could explain how the banks function and the Federal Reserve System works. We always found it interesting that the students never realized that our money is not backed by any precious metals. Have them look at a bill. Ask them to determine what it says. The bill has a money value and says "federal reserve note" not "silver or gold certificate." They will understand that our money is as good as the word of the United States government. An important thing for them to know and remember is that our currency is an acceptable medium of exchange worldwide.

Testing could be real-life situations involving check writing and balancing, taking out a loan, filling out income tax returns or buying and selling securities. Lastly, "at risk" students would benefit, as would all students by playing the stock market game. The stock market game allows students to hypothetically purchase $100,000 worth of various stocks and track them for a ten-week period. In playing this game they will experience all the fundamental concepts of economics such as supply, demand, and price. In addition learning to read a stock quote will reinforce basic math skills.

Another area where the activities of producer and consumer merge is in the process of learning resources and factors of production. Students could bring in snack treats like peanuts, potato chips or candy bars. The teacher could use the cooperative learning strategy *Roundtable* (Kagan, 1992) to determine all of the resources needed to make the products they just purchased. To implement Roundtable students must be

placed in heterogeneous teams of four. One piece of paper and one pencil should be provided to each team. The paper should have a heading specific to the information to be generated in this case: Resources Needed to Make Candy Bars. The paper and pencil is passed to the left as each student makes a contribution. The paper can be passed numerous times around the table. In order for individually accountability to be at its highest it is suggested that talking be prohibited. By using this strategy they will discover all of the human, natural, and capital resources. Following *Roundtable* the strategy *Corners* (Kagan 1992) can be used to discuss the factors of production: land, labor capital and entrepreneurship. Students are encouraged to think about what factors of production: land, labor capital, or entrepreneurship is the most important and why. *Corners* works best when students first think of the answer and write it down. Once this step has been completed three signs (one for each of the factors of production) are placed in various locations in the classroom and students are asked to move to the location that indicates their choice. Once in position the students are assigned a partner. The partners then discuss their choice and state why. Following this discussion the teacher using questioning skills helps develop an extensive list of the factors of production with the entire class. This will be fun and give them a better outstanding of the production process and the amount of resources need for things we take for granted. Lastly, at the end of the exercise students will be permitted to eat the snack they brought to class. This will be a positive reward for a job well done and enhance a memorable experience.

By utilizing an experiential approach as suggested by John Dewey to economics instruction, we believe it is possible to teach "at-risk students" the academic rudiments of the social science of economics. Because the course begins and ends with the students'

prior knowledge, the motivational level will be high and the classroom management problems will be low. Over a five-year period when teaching the more challenging sections of High School Economics the aggregate mean score on teacher made tests rose from a 73.5 to an 80.7 during that timeframe. We attribute this increase in test score to the adoption of the Dewey approach applied to Economics.

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