TIPS FOR TEACHING THE HIGH SCHOOL ECONOMICS COURSE

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Because economics is increasing in importance in the high school curriculum, it is critically important that it is taught well by well-trained teachers. We offer suggestions for teaching high school economics in the areas of content, methodology, materials, and professional development. We address what content to include, the use of textbooks and supplementary materials, and innovative approaches for teaching economics. The use of literature, film, music, and activity-based lessons are discussed. Teachers are encouraged to seek out professional development opportunities through the Council for Economic Education and networking opportunities through the Global Association of Teachers of Economics. Although teaching high school economics can be challenging, there are many helpful materials and resources available.

Key Words: Economics, teachers, high school, resources, content, methodology

Introduction

Since the inception of the national economic education movement in the middle of the twentieth century, the prominence of economics has grown in our public schools. Today, every state except Rhode Island includes economics as a part of its public school curriculum. Forty of these states now include specific economics standards. Part of this “rising tide” is manifested in state requirements for high school economics courses. As of 2009, 21 states required that students take a high school economics course as a graduation requirement, up from 17 states in 2007 (Council for Economic Education, 2009.) The increased importance of economics in high schools means it is critically important that it be taught well and that teachers are well-trained to teach it.

The importance of teacher training in economics has been a topic of discussion for many years. A 1966 report to the California State Department of Education stressed the importance of teacher preparation when its authors wrote:

If we are to achieve success in economic education throughout the United States, we must now focus on the economics preparation of future teachers in our schools. Local school systems and state departments of education, no matter how well motivated, and how well supplied with texts, curriculum materials, and consulting economists, simply cannot move forward in economic education without a substantially increased supply of teachers adequately prepared in economics through both pre-service and in-service training in the colleges. (p. 1)
In their article on improving pre-service economics teacher training, Mackey, Glenn and Lewis (1977) stress some of the specific recommendations of the Advisory Seminar to the California Department of Education concerning teacher preparation for three specific groups. According to the Advisory Report, for example, all future teachers should have a basic three semester-unit course in introductory economics. In addition, those who plan on being social studies teachers should take a nine-unit sequence in economics as undergraduates, while those planning on teaching economics at the high school level should be prepared to take an academic minor comprised of 21 semester units.

Although one would hope that these recommendations were widely discussed and eventually implemented, we find that this was not the case. In the teacher preparation program at California State University - Fresno, for example, a student who takes the approved program in social studies will be officially qualified to teach economics at the high school level with a minimum of six semester units of economics: a one semester introduction to economics course and a choice of either an upper division course in US Economic History or an upper division course in the History of Economic Thought. Regional studies in Atlanta and St. Louis found that the typical high school economics teachers had only two economics courses during their undergraduate preparation (Bosshardt et al., 2011.)

Given the cursory nature of teacher preparation in economics, it is good to know that teachers have a variety of opportunities to improve their economic knowledge and improve their techniques for teaching their students. Some of these opportunities and techniques are our focus here. A recent paper directed to new high school economics teachers made 12 suggestions about what every first year high school economics teacher should know (Lopus, 2011.) These twelve suggestions are listed in Table1. The suggestions are divided into categories of content, methodology, materials, and professional development. We also offer tips for teaching economics. Following a brief discussion of the Council for Economic Education network and the training opportunities for teachers, we discuss what content to include in a high school economics class, using textbooks, supplementary materials, and some innovative approaches for teaching economics.

Table 1

**Twelve Suggestions for First-Year High School Economics Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twelve Suggestions for First-Year High School Economics Teachers</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching the Content:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Focus on economics as a way of thinking.</td>
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<td>2. Do not be frightened of the subject matter of economics.</td>
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<td>3. Focus on economic literacy as outlined in the Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics.</td>
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4. Consider using the sample outline (included as Table Three in this paper) to organize your course.

5. Use current events to make economics relevant.


Methodology for Teaching High School Economics:

7. Use activity-based lessons.

Materials for Teaching High School Economics:

8. Use one of the many good high school economics textbooks available.

9. Take advantage of the many good supplementary materials available for teaching economics.

Professional Development: Formal and Informal:

10. Obtain copies of mainstream college-level principles of economics textbooks in both microeconomics and macroeconomics.

11. Find a mentor.

12. Participate in professional development programs in economics.

Source: Lopus (2011)

COUNCIL FOR ECONOMIC EDUCATION NETWORK

The Council for Economic Education (CEE), formerly the National Council on Economic Education, is a non-profit New York-based organization dedicated to providing materials and training for Kindergarten-12 teachers of economics, personal finance, and entrepreneurship. Many of the CEE programs are delivered through university-based Centers and Councils for Economic Education that are located throughout the country. The CEE-sponsored teacher-training workshops aim to improve economics instruction in the nation's schools. Teachers need only to go to the Council for Economic Education website (see Web Based References) to locate teaching materials and to locate the nearest Center or Council offering relevant training programs. Research results on the efficacy of these teacher training opportunities found that knowledge of both the teachers who participate (Bosshardt et al., 2011) and their students (Allgood & Walstad, 1999; Swinton et al, 2010) improves significantly after the training is completed.

To connect with other high school economics teachers around the world, teachers should join the Global Association of Teachers of Economics (GATE). The Council for Economic Education sponsors this organization to help economics teachers, and others interested in
economics education, connect with one another throughout the world. Membership is free, and GATE members receive discounts on CEE materials. The CEE maintains an online discussion group for GATE members.

**WHAT CONTENT TO INCLUDE?**

It should be comforting for high school economics teachers to learn that they are not alone since the CEE national economic education network provides a set of opportunities to learn how to apply economics knowledge in a classroom. But, what is the starting point? In planning what content to teach, many teachers begin with the required standards in their state. Many state standards are closely aligned with the Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics (CEE, 2010.) The Voluntary National Content Standards consist of 20 standards first published in 1997 then revised in 2009. They, along with grade-level benchmarks, were designed to represent the essential principles of economics that economically literate students should know in grades 4, 8, and upon graduating from high school. The major concepts included in the 20 standards are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics*

<table>
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<th>Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Scarcity</td>
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<td>2. Decision Making</td>
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<td>3. Allocation</td>
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<td>4. Incentives</td>
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<td>5. Trade</td>
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<td>6. Specialization</td>
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<td>7. Markets and Prices</td>
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<td>8. Role of Prices</td>
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<td>9. Competition and Market Structure</td>
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<td>10. Institutions</td>
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<td>11. Money and Inflation</td>
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<td>12. Interest Rates</td>
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<td>13. Income</td>
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<td>14. Entrepreneurship</td>
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<td>15. Economic Growth</td>
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<td>16. Role of Government and Market Failure</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Government Failure</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Economic Fluctuations</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Unemployment and Inflation</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Fiscal and Monetary Policy</td>
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Source: CEE 2010
How should the content be organized? In order to answer this question we present Table 3, which includes a traditional outline for an economics course. Although abbreviated, the suggested content in the outline reflects the Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics and most state standards that do not focus on personal finance. Those teaching a unit on personal finance within a traditional high school economics course would need to make adjustments to this content outline. The content order in the outline also corresponds to that presented in most high school economics textbooks.

One caveat on the order of the outline: teachers might want to intersperse the “World Economy” topics within the micro and macro sections. It would be a shame to teach this course and then run out of time before covering any of the important global issues that will affect high school students throughout their lives. A related point worth emphasizing is that the suggested time for the section on Markets, Supply, and Demand is three weeks, or one-sixth of the course. In our experience, many teachers devote so much time to the concepts of supply and demand that both macroeconomic and international economics topics are short-changed. While understanding markets and prices is undeniably important, we believe that high school students need to be exposed to the macroeconomic and international topics that dominate the news. For many students, the high school economics course provides the only formal training they will receive in economics. Understanding economics topics in the news will help to achieve the goal of educating students to be informed citizens in our democracy.

Table 3

Sample Outline of a One-Semester High School Economics Course

I. Introduction to Economics and Economic Systems (2 weeks)
   Major economic concepts: Scarcity, opportunity costs, decision making, incentives, market economic system, command economic system, traditional economic system, economic institutions.

II. Markets, Supply, and Demand (3 weeks)
   Major economic concepts: Markets and prices, supply and demand, controls on prices.

III. Business, Labor, and Market Structure (3 weeks)
   Major economic concepts: Productivity, profit, competition, monopoly, entrepreneurs, forms of business organizations, stock market, labor unions, income, human capital.

IV. The Role of Government (2 weeks)
   Major economic concepts: Role of government in a market-based economic system, market failures, government failures.

V. Macroeconomics (5 weeks)
   Major economic concepts: Gross domestic product, investment, unemployment, money, interest rates, inflation and deflation, Federal Reserve, monetary policy, fiscal policy, national debt.
VI. The World Economy (3 weeks)

**Major economic concepts**: Comparative advantage, voluntary trade/exchange, barriers to trade, exchange rates, trade deficits and surpluses, international organizations.


**USING A TEXTBOOK**

A good high school textbook with strong support materials can help structure a course and the course content, as well as provide suggestions for enhancing student learning. A recent survey of the existing high school textbooks (Leet & Lopus, 2007) found more similarities than differences among most of the textbooks, although there were differences in content emphasis. Some teachers choose to use college-level textbooks. While a university level text is obviously appropriate for Advanced Placement economics classes, we do not recommend using one in a traditional high school economics class. The reading level and mathematics rigor of college economics texts will make them incomprehensible to some students, and just plain frustrating to others. The encyclopedic nature of most university texts, moreover, may present content that is really more appropriate for the university classroom.

**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS**

Although textbooks are valuable for course content and structure, textbooks by themselves are probably insufficient in creating a high school economics course that engages students and addresses a variety of learning styles. We recommend investigating and using some of the many free and low-cost materials available to serve as supplements to textbooks in high school economics classes. The Council on Economic Education (CEE) is the source of many materials, which may be ordered (at a cost) from their website. The CEE also sponsors EconEdLink (see Web Based References), a free, searchable online library with over 400 lessons. Teachers may search EconEdLink by concept, by the Voluntary National Content Standards, by grade level, by lesson type, and by author. If a teacher, for example, is looking for a lesson about the stock market for grades 9 - 12, five lessons are currently available. These lessons address standards 2, 7, 8, or 18.

The Federal Reserve System is a useful source of materials for teaching high school economics. The homepage of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, for example, (see Web Based References) has a link in its Education Section that includes education highlights, student activities, teacher resources, and publications. The twelve Federal Reserve Banks employ economic education specialists who work to develop and disseminate teaching materials. Education resources available through all Federal Reserve Banks are listed on their website (see Web Based References) Teachers may search for lesson plans and publications by topic and grade level at the site.

Other governmental and public-sector organizations have lessons and materials for teaching economics available on their websites also, which we have listed in Web Based References below. For example, the US Treasury Department has a link for students and teachers. MyMoney.gov is a website that contains information from 20 Federal Agencies and Bureaus to teach about financial education. The CIA World Factbook is a favorite of many teachers for easy-to-access economic data about the countries of the world. From the
International Monetary Fund website, searching for IMF Center brings up links to high-school level lessons about the IMF, money, and international economics.

Some private for-profit businesses also publish materials designed for high school students. Many of these materials are of high quality and take a mainstream focus. Teachers, however, should exercise caution in choosing to use materials from sources that promote their own agenda or an extremist point of view.

**TRY INNOVATIVE APPROACHES AND TECHNIQUES**

There are a variety of alternatives to the traditional “chalk and talk” way of communicating basic economic ideas and concepts. Although the standard lecture format is still the overwhelming favorite among professional economics lecturers at colleges and universities around the world, many economic educators favor using alternative methods to engage students in their learning process. Here are some suggestions for using literature, movies, music, and activity-based lessons:

**Literature:** We suggest that teachers try to utilize great literature with economic concepts embedded in the plot. This idea was first used with classic children’s stories for students in elementary grades. Stories like *The Three Little Pigs* show the application of basic economic concepts like opportunity cost and decision-making as well as cost-benefit analysis. More modern creations like *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* illustrate the unlimited wants concept that is so essential to our basic premise of scarcity. Michael Watts (2003) has carried the literature theme to a more mature audience with *The Literary Book of Economics: Including Readings from Literature and Drama on Economic Concepts, Issues and Themes*. He uses 78 different excerpts to illustrate a wide variety of both micro and macro economic concepts. From Robert Frost’s poem *The Road not Taken*, which can be used to illustrate opportunity cost, to Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* illustrating macroeconomic money and banking concepts, Watts attempts to connect literature to economics.

**Movies:** Another innovative approach to teaching economics using the arts can be seen in the use of cinema in the classroom. Some economists have championed the use of full length films to dramatically illustrate economic concepts. In their *Journal of Economic Education* article “Economics goes to Hollywood” Leet and Houser (2003) present a list of movies they use in their university classes to illustrate economic concepts as diverse as scarcity (*Cast Away*), externalities (*Erin Brockovich*), money and banking (*It’s a Wonderful Life*), and government failure (*Born Yesterday, Chinatown*) among many others. Teachers would do well to review their original article for more suggestions. For an approach that emphasizes using only specific scenes from motion pictures see G. Dirk Mateer. (2006)

**Music:** Given the importance of music in the lives of young people, a high school economics teacher should consult the seminal article on the subject, *From rhythm and blues to Broadway: Using music to teach economics,* by Tinari and Khandke (2000). Their initial suggestions have since led to the creation of a weblog, From ABBA to Led Zeppelin (see Web Based References), where economic educators publish a variety of song lyrics that instructors of economics may find useful. Each posting includes a selection from the song’s lyrics and a brief assignment for students. Some of the more recent postings include two Brad Paisley songs. “American Saturday Night” deals with the implications of international trade in the American economy and “Welcome to the Future” addresses the implications of technological progress for
our economy. Maintained by Joshua Hall, Robert Lawson, and Dirk Mateer, the website will be featured in a forthcoming article in *The Journal of Economic Education*.

**Activity-based lessons:** Because economics is a social science working to explain human behavior, there are many classroom activities that can be used to make economics come alive for students. Activity-based pedagogical techniques include simulations, role plays, active demonstrations, group problem solving, and Readers’ Theaters. Active learning will both enliven instruction and facilitate student understanding. There is no need to imitate university methodology by over-emphasizing the lecture method. Economics can come alive for students when they see it in action.

Many lessons available through the Council for Economic Education focus on activity-based learning. *Economics in action: 14 greatest hits for teaching high school economics* (NCEE, 2003) is a best seller in this category and a good place to start. The lessons in this volume introduce a variety of decision-making skills and economic concepts using simulations, role-plays, group decision-making, problem solving, classroom demonstrations, and group presentations. A teacher looking for a lesson on supply and demand, for example, may wish to begin with Lesson 7, “A market in wheat.” This lesson has students act as buyers and sellers to determine an equilibrium price. The supply and demand diagram evolves from the simulation. A teacher looking for an intuitive way to teach about comparative advantage should consider using Lesson 13, “Comparative advantage and trade in a global economy.” Here, students discover the difference between absolute and comparative advantage through a role-play with Bert and Betsy, a brother and sister who have to complete household chores before they can go out with their friends. Although changing to an active teaching style may be uncomfortable at first, teachers will learn by doing and so will their students.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Teaching high school economics can be challenging for even the best teachers. Because it is often taught at the 12th grade level, it requires keeping the interest of students who are ready to leave high school and move on to other things. For teachers without strong content backgrounds in economics, it requires becoming familiar with the concepts. And, for teachers who have taken mathematical university-level economics courses, it requires adapting the knowledge to the interest level of high school students, and using engaging pedagogical methods as well.

As we indicate here, there are many materials and resources to help high school economics teachers. There are state and local university-based Centers and Councils that offer local and regional programs to improve economics teaching. In order to tap into the wealth of knowledge of their fellow classroom professionals, there is GATE, the Global Association of Teachers of Economics (GATE). Many good high school level textbooks and a myriad of supplementary materials exist. And, there are web-based resources describing innovative teaching techniques. We encourage high school economics teachers, and those who train and work with high school economics teachers, to take advantage of the available resources, and to enjoy what will be a rewarding experience.
References


Web Based References

Author Bios

Don R. Leet is Professor Emeritus of Economics at California State University, Fresno. He served as President of the National Association of Economic Educators in 1990 and continues to lecture on economic education topics internationally, most recently in South Africa in 2011. Dr. Leet has authored or co-authored several books. In 2001 he received the Richter Award as the Outstanding Faculty Member for teacher education, and was named Outstanding Professor of the Year for 2005-2006 in the College of Social Sciences.

Jane S. Lopus is Professor of Economics and Director of the Center for Economic Education at California State University, East Bay. She teaches a variety of courses, and her research interests lie in economic education. She was named the Cal State East Bay Outstanding Professor in 2006 and has received national awards for both research and leadership in economic education from the National Association of Economic Educators.