

1 Introduction

So let's introduce ourselves.

You, we assume, are a high school teacher, assigned to teach classes in economics or to teach the subject of economics as part of some other class. You are committed to good pedagogy and to fostering real learning and critical thinking in your students. But you are also pressed for time, and, if you are like most high school economics teachers, your own educational background is more likely to be in history or another social science than in economics.

Because you are (probably) not an economist, you may find the task of mastering unfamiliar content rather daunting. You may feel less than fully competent to teach the material to your students. On the other hand, not being trained as an economist also has its advantages. You may be more likely than someone who chose to study academic economics to find some of what you are supposed to teach a bit hard to swallow, intellectually or politically. You may have noticed that your textbook says little or nothing about economics and the environment, the distribution of income and wealth, discrimination, labor unions, globalization and the power of corporations, or other issues that might be close to your heart—or that what it does say seems to be naïve or one-sided. Most available textbooks are slanted toward free market, small-government solutions, reflecting an increasingly conservative bias in economics curriculum materials. If you have investigated some of the online materials developed by prominent councils and foundations, you may be aware that some seem to represent a distinct political perspective (which some might describe as “a little to the right of Attila the Hun”). What is a dedicated and concerned—but time-constrained—teacher to do?

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We are two economists who share a deep interest in education and somewhat critical views about the way economics is conventionally taught. Mark received his Ph.D. in economics in 1980 from the New School for Social Research in New York City, an institution well known for fostering alternative and progressive intellectual viewpoints. He teaches economics at Glendale Community College, Glendale, California. He has served on many professional panels related to economics education, and authored numerous articles on the teaching of economics. Julie had a more conventional education, receiving her Ph.D. in economics from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1986, but has special concerns about the treatment of women and the natural environment. After teaching for thirteen years at universities including the University of California, Davis, she now works in a position focusing on economics education at the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University. She has published many articles and books about the foundations of economic thought, as well as coauthored a college-level textbook. We have both been made aware of high school issues in our own towns through our own children's recent experiences as students. Neither of us has, admittedly, taught at the high school level, but we hope to make the expertise we have gained within the economics profession of use to you.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book is intended, first of all, to help you develop your own critical understanding of some of the major currents and controversies in contemporary economics. We believe you will be able to make better choices about using the materials that are already out there and available if you understand a bit of the intellectual and political history behind what you are expected to teach. In many cases, we expect that this background will primarily serve to give you more confidence about what you already know. Most textbooks, for example, teach that minimum wages are a bad idea, and that economic growth can be relied on to solve environmental problems. If you are a little skeptical about these assertions, we are on your side. We will tell you why such particular views ended up being showcased in standard teaching

materials, and describe research that balances out the stories. We will also clarify key terms and concepts that are often poorly explained in standard textbooks.

Second, we want to assist you in finding high quality, engaging materials and activities you can use in your classroom. Many textbooks do a pretty decent job of presenting usable material on at least some topics. But when they tend to neglect, distort, or inadequately explain a topic, we will point you toward resources available that can help, with a special emphasis on active-learning ideas such as small group classroom activities and case studies. Some of these resources are not only well designed pedagogically, but are also immediately available over the web at no cost. Others are in print or other media, and may only be available for a fee.

A GUIDE TO USING THIS BOOK

Part I of this book gives a general overview of high school economics education. We encourage you to read straight through these first three chapters in order to develop a broad context for thinking about your course. Chapter 2, directly following this introduction, describes the historical development of the high school economics course, including the politics behind how curriculum standards came to be set. Chapter 3 describes the intellectual traditions that have fed into the sometimes bewildering variety of topics covered in the typical contemporary high school textbook. We particularly focus on describing the major strengths and weaknesses of “neoclassical” economics, the dominant perspective in most books.

Part II of this book, on the other hand, should be treated much more like a reference book—you should look up what you most urgently need and leave the rest for another time. The chapters in Part II are arranged to follow, roughly, the flow of topics in a typical textbook. You may find that your textbook presents topics in a somewhat different order. Feel free to jump around among chapters, or use the extensive index in the back of the book to zero in on the material you need.

In each chapter, we have arranged helpful commentaries, teaching suggestions, and references to resource materials. Each section contains a short commentary about the strengths and weaknesses of

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the typical textbook treatment of a subject. Where applicable, the related Voluntary National Content Standard of the National Council on Economic Education (NCEE)¹ is described and briefly discussed. When we have found a concept or technique to be particularly inadequately explained in most high school textbooks, we have included a “Hint for Clear Teaching” box giving tips. Finally, each section concludes with an “Activities and Resources” section that lists ideas designed to enliven your classroom and help students truly come to a better understanding of economic life. We realize that between the time we write this book and you use it, web links and even sponsoring organizations may come and go, and materials may go out of print or otherwise become available. But we have tried to give you enough information that, with perhaps a little Google searching, you will be able to find something exciting you can use. A list of “Activities and Resources” topics is also included at the front of this book, to help you jump straight to these materials if you so choose. New resources, updates, and changed web addresses are available at our web site, www.introducingeconomics.org. Please contact Mark at mmaier@glendale.edu if you find a source that you would like us to add to the web site, or if you find a correction that needs to be made.

And, last but not least, Part III, “Resources,” is a further source of useful information. This is where you will find a “who’s who” of organizations involved in economics education, along with more detailed instructions on how to obtain some of the materials mentioned in the text.

Good luck! And, on behalf of all high school students, present and future—and the society they will build—we sincerely thank you for your concern and your efforts.

NOTE

1. The Voluntary National Content Standards were developed by the National Council on Economic Education in partnership with the National Association of Economic Educators and the Foundation for Teaching Economics. See Chapter 2.