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Association Lecture

Fifteen Theses on Classroom Teaching

Kenneth G. Elzinga*

The Southern Economic Association initiated a lecture series on teaching to be presented at its annual meeting. This paper, given on November 24, 2000, was the first such lecture. The editor invited the author to publish the lecture in *Southern Economic Journal*. Portions of the paper are the fruits of the author's more than 30 years of experience teaching economics. Parts of the paper are based on writings regarding pedagogy outside the discipline of economics. The paper puts forward 15 theses about teaching economics in the classroom. The theses range from propositions about why economics is a particularly difficult subject to teach to suggestions about how the classroom teaching of economics can be improved.

1. Introduction

I am flattered by the invitation from the Southern Economic Association to present this invited lecture on classroom teaching. It helped solve a personal identity crisis I was having last year.

A student I did not know called me out of the blue one day. I was on research leave at the time. She wanted to speak to me about a paper she was writing for a history class at the University of Virginia. The paper was to be about some historical event and each student in the class was to interview someone who had lived through the event. She wanted to interview me and hoped to find a topic that would fit my experience. So she asked me a question I found sobering: Was I alive during the depression? I told her I missed that event.

She then asked: Was I alive during the Vietnam War? I was, but she was disappointed to learn I did not fight in the war. I had a student deferment and then a faculty deferment. She then asked me, since I was in economics, if I had ever been involved in any major economic breakthrough; like starting a new industry. I told her I hadn't.

By this time, I was getting defensive, because it seemed as though I really wasn't very important. So I mentioned I *had* been through the student protests of the Vietnam War. I used to cross a picket line to teach my classes at Virginia. This seemed to interest her; maybe there was a topic lurking here, she thought. But it seemed pretty tame.

Her next question really put me in my place. She asked, "Well, did anything important happen while you were in high school?" The only thing I could think of was making the tennis team, majoring in mechanical drafting, and getting a date with Lynn Stevens.

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I did tell her the Korean War took place while I was alive, and the Civil Rights movement began. She asked me if I fought in the Korean War but I had to confess I was only a boy then.

Disappointed with my lackluster life, she said she might get back in touch with me after she thought more about the project. She never did.

That event made me reflect on who I am. This is not something economists do very often, or do very well. We leave it to poets and people who teach French literature.

A new school year began and I was no longer on research leave. I was to teach. And I continued to reflect on the question of who I am, or who I am called to be. And I suspect the answer to that question for me is similar to the answer for many practicing economists. A major part of my identity comes from my teaching: teaching what Adam Smith called “the obvious and simple system of natural liberty,” which many of my students find neither obvious nor simple. It turns out that *teaching* the subject of economics also is neither obvious nor simple.

Teaching students can take place in an office, a hallway, a dorm lounge, during a meal, even in a teacher’s home. No doubt the most important teaching economists do takes place on the pages of books and journal articles. But the pedagogical focus of this paper shall be teaching economics in the classroom.

To get the Protestant Reformation underway, Martin Luther posted theses on the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg. There were 95 of them. I do not intend to start a reformation in the teaching of economics, but I shall put forth 15 theses about teaching economics.

Thesis #1. Economics Does Not Produce Many Great Teachers

Many economics students, upon learning that Carlyle called economics the “dismal science,” wonder if Carlyle had studied the subject under their teacher. Most of us, over and again, have been introduced socially and identified as an economist, only to hear, “Oh, I took an economics course once. I didn’t understand any of it.” A casual survey informs me that other social scientists do not experience this reaction over and again the way economists do.

I won’t take much time to support my first thesis, other than to say that if you read books, not on teaching, but about great teachers, economists are not prominently represented. The best such book is *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers*, edited by Joseph Epstein (1981). From Hannah Arendt to Yvor Winters, and 16 other great teachers in between, not an economist appears. Across the Atlantic, Noel Annan’s wonderful book, *The Dons*, is not exactly laden with economists (1999). Economics has never produced a George Rylands.

I asked a Research Assistant to gather all the books she could find about great teachers in economics. The result was a dry hole. An article by William E. Cashin reports that economics consistently is one of the lowest-ranked disciplines on student ratings of instructors and courses (1990, pp. 113–121).

Now lest I be misinterpreted, let me be clear: There have been superb teachers of economics, relative to other teachers of economics. My mentor Walter Adams delivered great lectures and was a gut-wrenching teacher in the Socratic format. Graduate students at the University of Chicago raved about Milton Friedman’s classroom brilliance in his price theory course. But I shall stick with my first thesis: On the whole, the dismal science is rather dismal at producing great teachers.

Thesis #2. Thesis # 1 Is Not Surprising

Thesis #2 follows from the rationality postulate on which our discipline solidly rests. Put briefly, my second thesis is that it is not rational to be a great teacher of economics. From a cost-benefit basis, in most academic settings, it doesn't pay off. The law of diminishing returns kicks in before excellence is attained.

Professors of economics behave like the farmer who puzzled the county agent from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. When offered literature on how to improve crop yields, the farmer said to the county agent: "Why should I read your pamphlets? I already know how to farm better than I do." Most professors of economics already know ways that would improve their classroom output but do not implement them.

Thesis #3. It Is Harder To Be a Great Teacher in Economics Than in Most Other Disciplines

In other words, it isn't simply that the payoffs aren't there. Thesis #3 adds a different dimension. It is difficult to teach economics well. In other words, it is hard to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. This is not because economics is more difficult than all other subjects, though it is difficult. One is reminded of Keynes, his hair frazzled, his face displaying a look of frustration, saying "Economics is a very difficult subject." If *Keynes* found the subject hard, think about how hard it must be for. . . well, you get the idea.

If a person teaches art history and doesn't make it interesting to students, he isn't trying. If a person teaches abnormal psychology and doesn't make it interesting to students, she isn't trying. If a class in American Government isn't interesting, the teacher simply is not trying. What makes economics hard to teach is that our subject matter so often is different from the expectations of our students, particularly when they are being introduced to the subject at the principles level.

Speaking only of undergraduate economics students: Do you ever wonder, if you could read their minds, really probe their thinking about us as teachers, with all dissembling on their part set aside, what you would learn? I think many of my students are mentally declaring: "You teach economics, so make me into a money machine."

To remedy this disconnect between students' aspirations and the purposes of our discipline, I tell my introductory students over and over that economics is not business administration, nor is it public administration. But then I show them, again and again, how the principles of economics have enormous relevance to both business and government decision making. Having been told this is not a class on how to make money, good students find themselves realizing that the hidden logic of economic analysis nonetheless is useful for private gain in the world of private choice and in the world of public choice.

Thesis #4. Economics Lectures Are Like Refrigerators

Refrigerators and lectures both need to be regularly emptied of items that have gone stale and to have fresh items put in. I did not catch on until well into my teaching career that the best time to evaluate a lecture and decide what needs replacing is right after the lecture is

delivered, and not later, when one next teaches that topic area. It isn't easy, nor is it pleasant, to revise a lecture right on the heels of giving it. But unless the lecture turned out to be brilliant, there is never a better time to identify that lecture's weak spots than just after delivery.

How does one know if a lecture was brilliant, requiring no future revision whatsoever? William Breit once proposed to me a tangible benchmark. A brilliant lecture, one you can file away unrevised for next year's class, is one where students respond by carrying you out of the lecture hall on their shoulders and parade you around the school grounds. Most of us probably only have this happen one or two times per year.

Thesis #5. Good Lectures Need Stories

For veteran teachers, some lecture topics in our economics classes will be the same from year to year, but the content and organization must be kept fresh for a lecture to work well. What provides the input for keeping lectures fresh? *Examples*, or what Joanna Wayland Woos calls *stories*, bring relevance and fresh perspective to the lecture (1992, p. 197).

I have to step outside my own cultural boundaries, at times, in making references to fashion, such as cargo pants or platinum engagement rings. Stories change. I have deleted stories about the OPEC cartel, when it has been in disarray, and resurrected the story when OPEC has revived. Similarly, references to products need to be updated from time to time as well.

Sometimes the best stories are those that run in the opposite direction from the economic way of thinking. Economists should not shy away from stories like these. This is one of the ways Jesus taught. He would begin, "You have heard it said," and then continue, "but I say unto you. . . ." Economists can play off that method: "You have heard that the world works this way. . . but economic analysis says unto you. . . ."

When I am teaching the law of diminishing marginal utility, I go to the Bible for the countertheoretical story of the shepherd who rejoiced inordinately over finding a lost sheep, which was the 100th sheep, and according to the parable rejoiced more over the last incremental sheep than over any of the 99 sheep who were safely in the fold. And I inquire: Does this violate the law of diminishing utility? I take a Cracker Jack advertising poster to class with its countertheoretical claim that "*The More You Eat; The More You Want*" to tell a story about consumer theory.

If I am teaching the economics of tying, I use the story of IBM and punch cards, and I take a punch card to class—because nobody in today's student generation has ever seen a punch card, even though a few years ago there were 10 billion of them in use.

To develop and maintain informative and captivating examples involves watching for them in reading material that can range from scholarly journals to out-of-town newspapers encountered while traveling. One surveys these sources always raising the question: Is there a useful story here to weave into a classroom lecture?

Most professors keep files on research ideas. It took me too many years into my professional career to realize I needed just as systematic a file on teaching ideas. Now when I sit down to revise a lecture, I am not wondering where I'll find new material. I am sifting through material that I have already accumulated.

Some professors will bleed and die over academic freedom. I am much in their debt. But my next thesis involves a different kind of professorial zeal.

Thesis #6. Good Teaching Requires a Willingness To Bleed and Die over Audio and Visual Technology, over Lighting, and over Classroom Ventilation

It may seem banal to say, but students in a classroom need to *hear* the lecture. Part of the *hearing* process is the result of good capital equipment. Part comes through eye contact. Part comes through diction.

Watching my mentor, Walter Adams, began the process of teaching me about diction. Good diction is as important as having good stories in the teaching production function. If anyone wonders about the quality of his or her lecturing clarity, there is a reliable, albeit sobering test, that can be self-administered. Tape three or four of your own lectures and then listen to them. Awkward speech patterns, such as slurred words and interspersed *uhhs* between sentences, will be so embarrassingly revealed that a cure usually follows this examination.

A parenthetical remark not on the mouth but on the eyes. One area of teaching I wish I were better at is eye contact with my students. The best lecture ever in my classroom was by Alpheus T. Mason, a political scientist from Princeton who spoke on Louis Brandeis to my antitrust class. Right up front let us stipulate: It is hard to give an uninteresting lecture on Brandeis. But what struck me about Professor Mason was his eye contact with the class. He told me after the lecture that he took one student at a time, and looked him or her in the eye for about 15 seconds as he lectured.

I tend to look at the whole class as a glob of people, and I want to change that. If you have ever watched Billy Graham preach, whether you like the message or not, you will have noticed the amazing eye contact he has with the audience (even a television audience).

The owner of a good restaurant monitors customer reactions. It is part of keeping the restaurant good. That brings me to the next thesis.

Thesis #7. Teaching Involves Paying Attention To Student Preferences, Asking What It Is Students Want To Consume or Learn

The restaurant metaphor has its limits. At least in an introductory economics course, most students don't know *what to order* from the professor. Let me suggest two feedback mechanisms for students who might be unsure what the subject matter of the particular economics course might offer them.

Number one is to ask students on the first day of class to submit in writing or by E-mail to the class homepage what *they* want out of the course. You might also tell them what *you* hope they will get out of the course. For example, I tell my students I hope they will be able to understand a newspaper article on economics better than the journalist who wrote the article. Occasionally, during the semester, I show them how this objective is being met. From time to time, I mention (or read) one of *their* objectives and show how the course material is meeting that student's preferences. Sometimes I may explain why I cannot accommodate a particular written request from a student, such as this one from the last semester: "I hope to learn in this economics class how to avoid paying taxes."

The second feedback device is to ask students, about one-third of the way through the term, to respond in writing to this question: "What is the one thing you want me to do to improve the course?" I never ask that question without adding another question as a reminder

to students that the success of the course is also their responsibility: “What is one thing *you* could do to improve the course?”

The feedback data that faculty traditionally receive (at least at my institution), namely, end-of-the-semester course evaluations, arrive too late to improve that course. Soliciting feedback early on enables mid-course corrections. Moreover, the signal this exercise gives to students is always positive, particularly if the information is acted upon in a way that is transparent to students afterwards.

One of my colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Virginia encountered the following sentence written by a student in response to an exam question: “To Hawthorne, adultery was a major digression.” This was a student who had read *The Scarlet Letter*, but the student did not *own* the word *digression* (or the word *transgression* for that matter). And this brings me to my eighth thesis.

Thesis #8. Economists Think of Themselves as Teaching a Way of Thinking. Just as Much, We also Are Teaching Vocabulary

Just as it is important that students learn the economic way of thinking, it is important that they own (or at a minimum, lease) the jargon of the discipline. As students learn new vocabulary, they can relate it to topics encountered in other classes. Giving students an ownership of the vocabulary, through the teacher’s careful and congenial use of language, inspires students toward what Sidney Hook associated with great teaching: students who have a lasting appreciation of the subject. Most students who show up in our courses will not become specialists in economics. But if these students take away a continuing sense of the subject, it will be because they *own* a portion of our discipline’s terminology as a memory peg on which they hang the principles of the subject.

Demand and supply, equilibrium, liquidity preference, highest valued opportunity foregone, invisible hand, aspirational consumption, utility maximization, sunk costs, negative externalities, time value of money, asymmetric information, bounded rationality, residual income claimant, and others: These are memorable terms.

So teach words. New words. I take some pride when I hear one of my students no longer saying, “Did you hear what happened outside the dorm last night? There was a robbery!” but instead, after taking an economics course, saying, “Did you hear what happened outside the dorm last night? There was an *involuntary wealth transfer!*”

The business world emphasizes credentials. The worlds of law and medicine emphasize credentials. But in the academic world, we *really* emphasize credentials. We put them before our name, after our name, we calibrate and quantify performance, we rank people all the time, we look up to and look down on people according to performance-based credentials or titles. And that provokes my next thesis.

Thesis #9. In an Internet Age, Formal Credentials Count for Less. This Has Implications for Teaching

I am trying to learn to deemphasize credentials in my teaching. “Credentialing” can be a barrier between me and the undergraduate student who doesn’t even have a BA yet. A tradition

at the University of Virginia, which the school's founder Thomas Jefferson *wanted* for the then all-male faculty, was to use only Mr. before one's name, rather than Doctor or Professor. The tradition today is often ignored. But I ask my students not to use my title.

For years I wrote a personal letter of congratulations to every student of mine who got an A+. I was proud of them. They made me look good too. I still do this. But now I write a letter to every student who fails my classes. Last fall I wrote 30 of these letters. The A+ students are getting lots of strokes, with or without my adding to them. It took me about fifteen years to catch on to writing the young men and women who failed my class and whom, perhaps, I had failed as their teacher.

Thesis #10. Although It Is Not Easy To Learn about Master Teachers in Economics, There Are Resources for Learning How To Incrementally Improve Teaching Itself

The two best books on the subject are both edited volumes: (i) *Teaching Undergraduate Economics* (Walstad and Saunders 1998),¹ and (ii) *Teaching Economics to Undergraduates* (Becker and Watts 1998). Two periodicals sometimes containing useful techniques and helpful ideas are the monthly *Teaching Professor* and the quarterly *Journal of Economic Education*. I subscribe to both. This is not an exhaustive list, and the items on it are best read in small doses.

Thesis #11. When All Is Said and Done, There Are Two Basic Styles of Classroom Teaching: Apollonian and Dionysian

Apollo, of course, was the Greek sun god. He thought rationality was a virtue. Dionysus was the Greek god of wine. He liked ecstasy. In today's world, Apollo would be the god of prudent consumption, saving for the future, and hard work. Dionysus would be the god of sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

Apollonian teachers identify with their discipline. Dionysian teachers identify with their students. Apollonian teachers want to be respected by their students. Dionysian teachers want to be liked by their students. An Apollonian teacher lectures with rectitude and understatement; a Dionysian teacher with flair and exaggeration. The Apollonian's examples are just outside the student's current experience. The Dionysian's examples are hip and relevant.

It is tempting for those new to teaching to think that professors who inspire their students are those with a teaching style that mimics students' tastes, in their music, their humor, their attire, their language, or what they ingest. But good teachers have come in all styles and points along the Dionysian-Apollonian pedagogical spectrum.

The good teacher is one who chooses a lecture style somewhere along this spectrum that fits his or her persona. There is no one style that fits all. What *is* common to all good teachers is a mastery of the material. Good teachers, without exception, know their subject, *and* they like to talk about it.

¹ Portions of this paper are drawn from my essay, "Teaching Economics: Inspiration and Perspiration," in the Walstad-Saunders volume (Elzinga 1998).

Thesis #12. When All Is Said and Done, There also Are Two Basic Ways of Relating to Students, Two Mindsets a Teacher Can Adopt Toward Students. These Are the Teacher-as-Servant Mindset and the Teacher-as-Master Mindset

The Teutonic “Herr Doktor Professor,” famed for brusqueness and distance, illustrates the teacher-as-master. Jesus illustrates the teacher as servant, particularly the story of His washing the feet of those who called Him Rabbi (or Teacher).

The pedagogical style of teacher-as-master can be an effective way of relating to students. Oscar Handlin successfully taught history this way at Harvard. He reports,

In 1963 when the attendance in my course in American Social History got up above the four hundred mark, I ceased to offer it. I did not believe that an earnest desire for that kind of knowledge really moved that many undergraduates; and I feared that these lectures had become one of those experiences into which people drifted out of habit or reputation. Therefore, I chose subjects which on the face of it were not likely to draw crowds; I insisted on a whole year’s commitment, non-divisible; and I offered my courses at an hour that required students either to postpone or skip their lunch (1996, pp. 47–59).

Morris Cohen at [the former] City College of New York also was a master of this approach.

On the other hand, the teacher exemplar may be one who turns the normal classroom hierarchy upside down and becomes the servant. Not the doormat, mind you, but the servant: One who counts others better than himself.

In the matter of relating to students, there is no one size that fits all. Indeed, good teachers sometimes, somehow, mix the two contrasting elements. They are authority figures because mastery of the material gives them that stature. But they do not teach by authoritarian methods. They show their concern for their students not by imitation of student speech or dress, or grade inflation, or adopting the academy’s political correctness *du jour*. Rather, these teachers care about their discipline, and flowing out of this concern they show that they care about their students, like the model lieutenant who is very much in command, but is at the same time genuinely devoted to her troops.

It is not possible to be a servant to a multitude of students, especially in introductory courses where class sizes often are large. But if students witness, or see signaled to them, that the professor is willing to serve students, only a small number actually step forward asking for individual attention. Usually, the students served will be those most in need of special attention. Signals of a teacher’s willingness to serve may include: allowing students to call the teacher at home (I find students value this option; very few ever exercise it); being available after a lecture as long as there are students with questions (this is the best way for me to learn how a lecture was received); and not ending office hours until the student queue is exhausted (this may require a special dispensation if there is a family who might be affected).

I have the reputation as teaching tough courses but caring for my students. Part of my reputation for care comes from expenditures of time; part comes from simply signaling a willingness to care. But as any rational actor would, I have limits to caring. Recently a student of mine told me she was transferring to Cornell University and she asked me to sit down with her and go through Cornell’s catalog to help her select courses. I declined that opportunity. Last semester, I did not respond affirmatively to a student’s request that I help with her income tax forms, notwithstanding her assurance that I “could do the job in no time.”

Thesis #13. Good Teaching Is Not Complicated; It's Just Hard

A teacher's ability to inspire is not derived from anything very fancy or costly except in the form of instructor time and diligence. For most teachers, good teaching does not occur because the muse of their particular field decided to light upon their students. Most good teaching does not come as much from inspiration as from perspiration, or what is sometimes called sweat equity. The perspiration is the result of lots of preparation, directed to the most visible part of teaching, the lecture, and to the subterranean components, like test preparation.

Thesis #14. Good Teaching Requires No Radical Change in Curriculum; No Special Flair that the Teacher Must Possess; and I Know of No Evidence that It Requires Radical Changes in Educational Technology

Thesis #15. Good Teaching also Requires No Extraordinary Self-Confidence or Unique Gifts

I say this on the basis of a nonrandom sample of one. Lionel Trilling once described college teaching as "a lawful seizure of power." That has not been my experience. For years, I would be sick to my stomach before giving a micro principles lecture on a topic I had taught several times before. I am a shy person, I always have been, and I suppose I always will be, and I don't think my colleagues think of me as *the life of the party*. There is no false modesty in my saying that if I can be seen as a successful lecturer, so can most others.

Alfred North Whitehead, a classroom immortal, said that when he lectured, he experienced "a curious mixture of being immensely at ease *and* stage fright." (Brennan 1981, p. 48). Isn't that remarkable? I believe every teacher I admire relates to this "curious mixture of being immensely at ease and stage fright." I take comfort in these words. If Alfred North Whitehead was this way, perhaps those of us who are mere mortals in the classroom can be permitted the same mixture of comfort and anxiety.

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