

Introduction

ECONOMICS is a controversial subject, and on many points there is wide difference of opinion even among the best informed. This latitude of thinking sometimes leads to an advocacy of teaching "without bias," presenting a wide range of opinions, often in conflict, leaving it to the student, immature and inexperienced, to pick whatever happens to appeal to him. This is urged as "open-minded" and tolerant, but too often an open mind is a mind wide open at both ends, letting everything trickle through and leaving no conviction, and tolerance means a wobble-mindedness, arriving at no definite opinions and endorsing nothing. With these attitudes the writer differs, for he believes that a teacher should have some convictions which he is willing to teach and to defend.

This book may be characterized by a positiveness not always found in economic textbooks, but we feel that each should teach truth as he sees it, leaving to others the advocacy of philosophies which he rejects. We make no pretense of stating both sides of every question if one side is, in our opinion, right and the other side wrong; and when it comes to discussing communism, socialism, and other questionable or dangerous cults, we limit ourselves to expounding their fallacies and failures. Washington said, "If, to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterwards defend our work?" Let the other fellow have his say and preach what he pleases, but it is not incumbent upon us to let him preach his heresies in our pages or in any institution with which we are connected.

Despite this position, we recognize wide divergence of thinking and background and do not believe that a subject like economics, in which there is such conflict of opinion, should be taught dogmatically. Aside from fundamentals, such as definitions and factual premises comparable to the axioms of geometry, we would not insist upon agreement by the student with every statement. A forced agreement is not sincere conviction, and dissenters should be reasoned with and, if possible, led to see the truth, but not bulldozed.

Education means leadership. It is the duty of the teacher to lead and he can only hope, but not require, that the student shall follow. Many believe that every side must be given equal

emphasis; but, in teaching history, science or almost any other subject, we would not teach exploded or unsound ideas. Yet in economics and other social subjects, the teacher is sometimes expected to show no discrimination between what he considers sound and what he considers unsound. Such teaching leads only to confusion and bewilderment, especially to the immature mind.

We question the sincerity of some appeals for open-mindedness and tolerance. There is sometimes much tub-thumping and demand for "freedom of speech," but often crackpots who have had their say endeavor to suppress the teaching of more reasonable philosophies, branding them as narrow, intolerant, and reactionary. Of this spirit we see many cases—the daily paper is full of them. But if the reader questions our statement, we refer him to *Collectivism on the Campus* by E. M. Root, which tells of the systematic attempt on the part of those who professedly stand for academic freedom, to prevent free expression of belief. It is the faculty and not the student who is intolerant of difference of opinion.

Common-Sense Economics has been written more with the thought of stimulating thinking and discussion than as a catechism of questions and answers. We append to each chapter a few leading questions, not necessarily demanding a yes or no answer but as suggestions to promote discussion and argument. Some see the mind of the student as a tank to be filled with a conglomeration of "facts," often more or less questionable. Teaching consists of prodding the student in recitations to drag out information stored in his mind, and examinations are a process of siphoning off samples to see if what has been put in has stuck or if it has leaked away, evaporated or soured. This is not teaching; it is trying to find out what the student has already learned. We see the mind as a machine which can accomplish much if trained and taken care of. Examinations should consist of watching the machine in action, keeping it in adjustment, and gauging its efficiency. Facts discovered by using our minds will be long remembered but items dropped into an unfunctioning vacuum are soon forgotten.

Economics is not easy to teach. To offer, as an introduction, a mass of statistics, graphs and formulas, sometimes with discussion cloaked in a jargon of strange words, creates a prejudice. No wonder many think it is uninteresting and difficult! But Carlyle was wrong in calling it "the dismal science." It is a very live subject, full of human interest; a study of how we make our living, of our relations with one another, and everyday

questions—why men are out of jobs, how to run a business, the taxes we pay and how they can be made easier, why prices are high, why there is a shortage of housing, how to make provision for old age, and a hundred other questions which are on everybody's tongue today.

We see no reason for making the elements occult mysteries and cloaking fundamentals with formulas and a strange vocabulary. That economics can be made easy has been demonstrated by the success of John Burger, whose system teaches economics to children scarcely out of kindergarten. Elementary, yes, but he gives them ideas on fundamentals of economics which many professional economists miss.

Carlyle was wrong too when he called economics a science, for the human factor enters into it. The relations of the sides and angles of a triangle are constant, definite and unchanging, but reactions of capital and labor are not fixed. You cannot reduce dealings between a buyer and seller to hard and fast equations as you can the relationship of the diameter to the circumference of a circle. Human judgment and human prejudice enter. The employer, worker, buyer, seller, creditor or debtor may act according to rule, but often each acts in a totally different way just to see what will happen! This strong human interest, this human equation, is something which makes economics intensely interesting to alert minds.

Aid your students to reason logically and to see the truth, for the very fact that we cannot teach a subject like economics as we would teach geography or chemistry makes it all the more important to discriminate between truth and error and to guide the beginner. In an exact science we can prove our case: in a controversial subject it is necessary to present our case and point out fallacies. Encourage students to have ideas and to form opinions, but keep in mind the derivation of the word "education"—a leading forth. This applies especially at undergraduate levels. With proper guidance a student will generally see the truth.

In a beginner's class there is little room for supplementary reading and study, and it is better to encourage definite thinking than to confuse the student with conflicting reading. We therefore offer no bibliography or documentation, but we do suggest a few books for the teacher's use, to supplement his reading and perhaps the reading of aggressive students.

Students like to argue: it is the idea of what the boys call a "bull session." By argument and discussion students are trained

in systematizing their thinking, putting it into words and presenting it as reasoned, logical argument. Such training is invaluable to everyone—the necktie salesman on the corner, the great jurist in the Supreme Court, or a history-making diplomat. Robert Louis Stevenson well said, “The problem of education is two-fold, first to know and then to utter.” The very ability to express our ideas is a part of education, and such education is vital.

Those schools that have live debating societies are fortunate, for with guidance, students will often find as much zest in the competition of the debate as on the athletic field. To channel such activities into lines of economics and political science is not difficult, for we deal with a subject of acute interest and of vital importance. Lively debates may be stimulating and provocative of keen student interest, and even in a classroom such methods may be pursued. Encourage the students to answer each other’s questions. Pick a subject or a question and let two students argue it with one another, of course in an orderly way. Such exercise gives an opening for an introduction to parliamentary law and it is valuable as training in forensics. Do not be too quick to answer a student’s question yourself: ask the other students what they think about it and let them answer it.

The matter printed in different typography will suggest ideas. Emphasize past history, for often students think ideas that are new to them are absolutely new. They often see the Marxian idea as progressive, not knowing that it goes back to the beginning of time and has always failed. When students see old fallacies as something new, tell them about the little woodchuck which, after his first winter of hibernation, came out and shook himself in the sunlight and said, “That is the coldest winter I ever remember,” and then tell our students that they are like the little woodchuck. They must learn by history and by the experience of others if they are not to repeat the blunders of the past.

We believe that, with the right approach and with the encouragement of discussion, economics can be made a fascinating subject and one not over difficult. We believe also that it is one of the most necessary in the curriculum, for if the next generations are not better trained than we have been, it is unfair and dangerous to toss into their laps such questions as inflation, taxation, public borrowing, the conflict of communism with the American ideal, and a hundred other questions. On these matters our own generation has made a terrific mess which threatens to

wreck our whole civilization. Let us hope that the youngsters now in our schools will be wiser in their generation than we have been in ours, for the future of the Republic depends upon them.