Staff Contribution 2-19

Miscellaneous Staff Contribution of the Department of Agricultural Economics

Purdue University
Lafayette, Indiana

For information concerning additional available publications write: Librarian, Department of Agricultural Economics

AROUSING THE BEGINNING STUDENT'S INTEREST IN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

Milton M. Snodgrass
Purdue University

Very few incoming agricultural freshmen would choose a major in economics if they were required to indicate a choice on their application blank. The freshmen have a vague notion, if any, regarding the nature of economics. On the other hand, the words "animal husbandry" have considerable appeal to the typical farm boy. The student's interest in an introductory economics course stems largely then from his general interest in a college degree. While the problem of arousing student interest plagues any teacher, the beginning economics instructor is particularly challenged.

Content of beginning courses in agricultural economics varies widely with instructor and university. Some could be classified as farm management courses while others emphasize economic history and economic trends. Others are basic economic principle courses which are more commonly taught outside of the school of agriculture. Regardless of specific content, course objectives commonly are: (1) to give the student some of the basic economic principles as tools in solving problems, (2) to relate the role of economics as a social science in a physical science world, (3) to stimulate objective reasoning and student interest regarding the role of agriculture in our nation's economy and current agricultural economic problems, (4) to entice beginning students to choose economics as their major field of study.[1] These objectives are by no means exhaustive or independent of each other. They are compatible, but to accomplish all of them is a formidable task for any teacher.

Now accepting the above list as course objectives, how can the instructor arouse student interest in agricultural economics. For purposes of discussion, the instructor, the student, and the subject will be separated although their interdependence is recognized. The relative importance of each is a subjective evaluation biased largely by individual experiences.

First: with regard to the teacher, many admirable traits of a good teacher could be enumerated and discussed. Foremost is the teacher's enthusiasm for economics. If the subject is dull and unlively to the teacher, it certainly will be reflected to the student as dull and uninteresting. It is difficult for a student to "go to sleep" if the instructor is "bubbling over" with interest in the subject himself. The teacher's interest in the subject must be channeled however, to the end of instilling this same interest in the student and not for self-gratification. It would seem rare that a teacher would become effervescent over explaining the elasticity of demand for the purpose of satisfying his own ego, yet, this is the very charge made by many educators. According to Lewis:[2]

---

1 At these meetings four yearsago, Professor Wertz listed two objectives which tend to summarize these four. Wertz's summary was (1) to give the student the economic background necessary to understand properly and to analyze the major economic issues facing farm people, and (2) to stimulate and maintain student interest. See Virgil R. Wertz, "Some Guideposts in Teaching Economics", Journal of Farm Economics. December 1954, p. 872.

2 B. W. Lewis, "Economic Understanding: Why and What", American Economic Review, May 1957, p. 661.

Economics as it is taught in the colleges is too abstract and involved. Professors are so bent on making an exact science of their subject that they insulate it from all reality by the employment of artificial assumptions; and then, within this unreal environment, they amuse themselves by manipulating their elaborately contrived technical apparatuses in the endless conduct of meaningless exercises. Refinements are piled on refinements in ever more rarefied settings until the convolutions and inter-actions become so entangled, so incapable of being understood, and so devoid of import that the helpless student is left far behind.

Tied very closely to this last idea is the teacher's ability to reduce abstract economic principles to simple, everyday language and meaning. Even though the teacher's interest is genuine, the student will not think it such unless the teacher communicates to him at a realistic level. Emphasis on numerous refinements, assumptions, and insistence on rigorous analysis is important for upper level and graduate training, but is pure folly as a means of intriguing beginning students.

The beginning teacher needs a few traits which the graduate instructor can do without and still be respected and successful. These include a keen and appropriate sense of humor and a smooth delivery when lecturing or answering questions including proper pace. In addition, the instructor must take time for individual personal conferences outside the classroom.

A keen and appropriate sense of humor brings the teacher closer to the student's world of reality and makes an atmosphere conductive to a free exchange of ideas. This does not mean that the teacher must tell jokes or stories -- nothing is worse than five minutes of prepared stories per lecture. An irregular, shaky delivery immediately signals to the beginning student that the instructor does not know his subject. This quickly leads to a lack of respect which may endanger proper class discipline and precipitate other problems.

Second: with regard to the student, the obvious characteristic necessary in the student is his interest in learning in general and how badly he wants to attain a college degree. High school counseling and proper parental influence can help. His interest in learning is a prerequisite for interest in a specific subject.

The freshman has several traits which can be advantageous or harmful to him. He very likely feels that his recently earned high school diploma means that he "knows quite a lot". If this exemplifies itself by self-confidence and eagerness to challenge his instructor, it is good. However, the egotist helps neither himself nor the class.

Most beginning students and a lot of upper classmen do not realize why they are at college or what a university degree represents. If they are farm boys in agriculture, they may rebel against taking courses in chemistry, English, history, etc., which they feel are not useful in raising a crop of corn or finishing a feeder steer. Thus, even in agricultural courses, the instructor must use examples to tie subject matter to real life. Any beginning teacher should point out what a university degree is, what it means, and why they are at college regardless of the course being taught.

Any beginning instructor should also weave some philosophy of life and the understanding of education into his lectures. This is prompted both by the traits mentioned above and the frustration which freshmen sense of not knowing his specific oocupational interests. This frustration grows in intensity as he progresses.

Within certain limits, I tell students it is a good sign when they don't know what they want to do. Just as the horizons of comprehended knowledge grows faster than the sphere of understood knowledge, so do individual goals grow and change as time passes. The beginning instructor is obligated to alleviate the fears of the unknown future and make the intrigue of it challenging. With this approach, the emphasis on education becomes one of the broadening kind rather than a mere specialized curricula. This is not to cast bad light on a specialized curricula in agriculture such as Wild-Life Conservation. However, it does happen to give the agricultural economist a good talking point when various curricula are discussed.

Personal conferences take time and with pressure on teachers to do research, conferences are often neglected. A test conducted at Purdue some years ago involved splitting a group of freshmen who were all doing unsatisfactory work in their courses into two groups. The first group was counselled by discussing their subjects, how to improve their study habits, etc. In the second group, counselors never mentioned academic matters, but rather discussed any subject which appeared--sports, the weather, the junior prom, etc. The test concluded that there was no significant difference in the progress made by the two groups after being counselled. Why? Because the important thing in arousing student interest (a prerequisite for better performance) is the relationship existing between a student and his instructor; the student realizing that someone really cares for him as an individual and is concerned over his progress, and his future. This becomes difficult in a large university where beginning sections in introductory courses are often large and the instructor is carrying a research load. However, in my opinion, this is the biggest single contributor to student interest. At Purdue, I am seriously considering requiring at least one student conference per semester from each student.

As already mentioned, the beginning student is interested in practical things which to him means learning a host of facts. He measures his progress by trying to remember mentally all of the facts he can about a certain completed course. Thus, he abhors a discussion type question in an exam. Added to this is his weakness in putting into written word his thoughts. Professor Chastain last year made a good case for motivating students to acquire economic knowledge through the understanding form of learning.[3] Ability to reason should take precedent over memorization of facts and it is pleasing when students list "ability to reason" as the primary thing they have learned from my course.

Third: with regard to the subject, Professor Wertz states that experience with their orientation type course at Ohio State indicates that the point of departure largely determines the amount of student interest.[4] Two major points of departure are (1) start with aspects of the farm -- a narrow picture, or (2) start with the "big picture" of world and U. S. agricultural production, nature of consumption, etc., and work back to the individual farm. The point of view helps determine whether the course is farm management or economic history. While important, it would seem that student interest can be aroused with either point of departure.

---

3 E. D. Chastain, Jr., "Toward More Effective Training in Economic Fundamentals", Journal of Farm Economics, December 1957, p. 1705.

4 Virgil R. Wertz, op. cit., p. 870.

Economics is a difficult subject to teach for several reasons. As opposed to a physical science such as physics, every man is his own economics expert. There are many common misconceptions about the economy, e.g., the middleman is thought to be a parasite and a scoundrel which reduces the farmer's profit by most farm boys. Properly taught these misconceptions can be converted into excellent "attention getters" and "interest arousers". The beginning student is challenging and will argue strong and loud that the middleman is a real parasite to our economy. If handled properly, he is very eager to find out why he is wrong--this is particularly true of the better student. For two semesters, I have given a fun quiz on the first day of class with questions on some of these misconceptions. When the student finds out he missed 80-90 percent of the questions where the answers were seemingly clear-cut and obvious to him, many are aroused immediately to find out why.

The fact that there are many economic questions with no specific right or wrong answers baffles the beginner. This problem too can be converted to a tool for stimulating interest through class discussions. In addition, this usually makes students become less dogmatic concerning the operation of institutions particularly the government, e.g., as they see conflicting objectives and incompatible ends in some policy issue.

Admittedly, there are aspects of economics which tend to make it a dull subject for the beginner. Definitions and meanings of terms can quickly throw a beginner into a tizzy when common words such as "production" and "capital" have several meanings. Value of abstract theories are difficult to describe to the student also.

Before closing, I would like to comment on the objective of enticing students to become economic majors. Its importance varies widely by individual universities. In my opinion, extreme emphasis or de-emphasis of this objective would be harmful. In some schools, a considerable degree of competition exists among freshmen instructors in getting men into their options. This can be detrimental to the quality of instruction and to the student in counseling if carried too far. However, some competition no doubt improves the quality of instruction.

In summary, it goes without saying that two instructors cannot teach a course in the same way. A plea is entered, however, to instructors to get closer to the individual students in their classes. The relationships between student and teacher is a key factor in stimulating and maintaining student interest; a major part of which may be accomplished outside the classroom. This too, varies by individual instructors, size of class, and student attitude.