

INCLUDING CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES IN PRINCIPLES OF ECONOMICS COURSES AT A STATE UNIVERSITY: AN INITIATIVE IN EXPANDING THE CURRICULUM

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There was a time when economists recognized the importance of religion as a motivating factor of human behavior. In one of the early best-selling principles textbooks we read

For man's character has been moulded by his everyday work, and the material resources which he thereby procures, more than by any other influence unless it be that of his religious ideals; and the two great forming agencies of the world's history have been the religious and the economic. Here and there the ardour of the military or the artistic spirit has been for a while predominant: but religious and economic influences have nowhere been displaced from the front rank even for a time; and they have nearly always been more important than all the others put together.¹

Thus there would seem to be a precedent for the inclusion of religious themes into our principles courses. And yet we know that this is rarely done. In a recent article Stapleford (2000) presents a survey of issues related to Christian ethics that appear in some of our current best-selling principles textbooks.² Stapleford notes that while many issues with ethical ramifications appear in modern principles textbooks the authors do not explore them in any detail, let alone from a Christian perspective. Stapleford suggests that perhaps the best way to engage students in a discussion of ethical issues is to utilize a supplemental text in combination with a standard principles text. This he argues will allow instructors the opportunity to discuss ethical issues “even in a secular, ‘value-free’ institution.”³ It is just such an approach that is described here.

I. The Assignments

These assignments in incorporating religious themes into principles courses were conducted at the University of North Dakota during the Fall 2000 semester (Principles of Microeconomics) and the Spring 2002 semester (Principles

of Macroeconomics).⁴ In each case the assignment involved reading and commenting on a supplement to the main text. The choice of a supplemental book is a clearly a critical factor in determining the outcome of these assignments. The books I chose to use are certainly not the only candidates and may not be those chosen by other instructors. An anonymous referee has suggested some alternatives that might be considered: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* by Michael Novak; *Bulls, Bears and Golden Calves* by John Stapleford; *God the Economist* by M. Douglas Meeks; *The Morality of Capitalism* edited by Mark W. Hendrickson; *The Morals of Markets* by H. B. Acton; and *Sacred Trust* by Robert Ekelund *et al.* In light of the many books available it is important to note precisely why those used in these assignments were chosen. The criteria I used were twofold. First, I wanted books that would not be viewed by students as “religious books” but that did indeed contain (either explicitly or implicitly) a Christian message. Second, I was looking for short books so as to minimize negative feedback from the students over having to read an extra book.

The detailed assignment sheets for each course are available upon request. Given the time lag between the assignments, the second benefited from lessons learned during the first. I discuss the assignments sequentially in order to provide a sense of the learning-by-doing that transpired.

II. Assignment 1 Principles of Microeconomics Course *Overview of the Assignment*

The students were assigned *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* by Josef Pieper as a supplement to the main text *Microeconomics* by David Colander. Pieper's book was first published in English in 1952 and contains two essays, “Leisure the Basis of Culture” and “The Philosophical Act.” The essential message of the book is that work and working, while important activities, are not enough to ensure that we

become complete human beings. Rather to achieve this latter we must have leisure in the Aristotelian sense. That is, we must take time to contemplate the divine. The students were asked to read Pieper; to keep a journal recording their reactions to the book (to be turned in—along with a one-page reaction essay); to prepare the answers to certain questions (assigned in advance) for discussion in class; and to write two one-page essays that were assigned after the class discussion of the book. The specific questions in essay number one were “What does Pieper mean by Leisure?” and “Is it possible for people to have ‘leisure’ as Pieper defines it in the world described by Colander?” Essay 2 questions were “Pieper writes about the nature of philosophy: ‘to philosophize means to transcend the workaday world and that the philosophical act is incommensurable with the world of supply and demand.’ Does this mean that there is no place in economics for philosophy?” and “What does Pieper say real wealth consists of? Is his definition consistent with wealth as described in Colander?”

Student Reaction

The student reaction was mixed. Not all students took the assignment equally seriously. For example, several students turned in reading journals that were nearly completely full spiral notebooks containing handwritten notes detailing lots of grappling with nearly every page of the book, while others turned in merely a few pages containing a typed outline of the book. Many students questioned the “connection” between the book and economics; indeed many wondered why we were reading a book on philosophy in an economics course. Some complained of the unfairness of the assignment given that other instructors did not require their students to read this book.

The above themes came out in the journals as well as in the class discussion.⁵ Numerous interesting points were brought up during the class discussion. Particularly intriguing were the responses to the question “What does Pieper have to do with economics?” Several students argued that the answer is nothing. One student provided an answer that was truly outstanding. He said that Pieper has everything to do with economics because economics is all about equilibrium and Pieper is writing about the nature of equilibrium in life.

Student reaction to this assignment was also provided on the course evaluations, in two forms. The first was from the university-provided set of questions to which the students fill in a response of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD). My concern was that including the Pieper book into the course might negatively impact the course evaluation. At the University of North Dakota a summary question is often used to provide an overall sense of the student’s satisfaction with

and the instructor performance in any particular course. That question is “I would recommend this instructor to other students.” The percentage of students responding Strongly Agree and Agree to this statement is viewed as a key indicator of the success of this course. The mean value of the students who responded SA or A from 3 semesters of Principles of Microeconomics without the Pieper book is 90 percent while the percentage of students responding SA or A during the Pieper semester is 92 percent. While certainly not a comprehensive measure of student satisfaction and clearly not a *ceteris paribus* result it does suggest that the assignment had little if any detrimental impact on the course evaluations.

The second form of reaction to the assignment was from the student responses to the question, “Would you recommend that I assign *Leisure the Basis of Culture* to my future students? Why or why not?” Students responded with 43 percent saying yes, 50 percent saying no, and 7 percent giving no opinion.⁶ Of those who said yes the most common explanation indicated that the student was happy to be challenged by reading something other than pure economics. Of those who said no the most common reasons were that Pieper was too hard to read and/or that it seemed to have nothing to do with economics.

Lessons Learned

A number of important lessons or insights were learned from this assignment:

- Better motivation for the assignment should be provided to the students.
- The handouts describing the details of the assignment should be more explicit about the purpose of the assignment and how it fits into the course.
- Students should not be required to turn in journals in their entirety or at least journals shouldn’t be graded in their entirety.
- The learning goal of the assignment should be thought through more carefully.
- The assignment should be better integrated into the course.
- More than one day of class discussion should be dedicated to the book.

Most, although not all, of these insights were incorporated into the next assignment, described below.

III. Assignment 2

Principles of Macroeconomics Course

Overview of the Assignment

Students were assigned *A Student’s Guide to Liberal Learning* by James V. Schall to supplement the main text *Macroeconomics* by David Colander. This book is a part of

the Intercollegiate Studies Institute *Student Guide* series. It presents an excellent description of and impassioned defense for liberal learning. In addition Schall presents a simple two-step process for the student who wants to pursue liberal learning.⁶ The main lesson from the book is that “the human mind must also choose to use itself properly to achieve its primary purpose, which is to find the truth of things.”⁷ The students were asked to read Schall; to write two one-page essays upon specific topics/questions assigned before the book was read; and to have those essays ready prior to classroom discussion of the book.

Insights incorporated from Assignment 1

All but one of the lessons learned from the Pieper assignment were utilized in the creation of the Schall assignments.

Lesson: Better motivation for the assignment should be provided to the students.

Action: An often-mentioned student question from the Pieper assignment was “How does this fit in with economics?” To forestall this question for the Schall assignment I reminded the students that the macroeconomics course they were enrolled in counts as part of the General Education Requirements at the University. Indeed I reminded the students that there are numerous specific general education goals described in the University Catalog. I pointed out that in light of this it is incumbent on me as the instructor to somehow incorporate a general education component into the course. I informed the students that the vehicle chosen to do this was the assignments associated with the Schall book.

Lesson: The handouts describing the details of the assignment should be more explicit about the purpose of the assignment and how it fits into the course.

Action: I spent more time writing and rewriting the assignment sheet. In addition I created a grading rubric for the essays so as to cut down on the time required for grading.

Lesson: Students should not be required to turn in journals in their entirety or at least journals shouldn't be graded in their entirety.

Action: I eliminated the reading journal requirement altogether.

Lesson: The learning goal of the assignment should be thought through more carefully.

Action: I spent a substantial amount of time reflecting on what the purpose of the assignment was to be, resulting in a more clearly stated and motivated assignment.

Lesson: The assignment should be better integrated into the course.

Action: I did not figure out a way to do this. Instead the Schall book was admittedly an add-on to the course—under the hook of a general education requirement.

Lesson: More than one day of class discussion should be dedicated to the book.

Action: I allocated two class periods for the discussion of the Schall book—one for each of the two essays assigned.

Student Reaction

Student reaction was mixed. Some students really enjoyed the book and thanked me for having assigned it. Others questioned the inclusion of such a book in an economics course. Some objected to the western orientation of the material discussed by Schall. Numerous students complained that their vocabulary was not the equivalent of Schall's and this made them consult a dictionary—an extremely irritating thing to have to do. The reaction I found most surprising came in the form of the responses in the second essay wherein students had to state whether or not a book on economics would be an essential part of their personal library. The vast majority (around 80 percent) indicated a book on economics would indeed be an essential part of their personal library. Perhaps students merely told me what they thought I wanted to hear. What was surprising was the nature of the arguments presented in support of their opinions. Many students did a very nice job of arguing for the importance of economics as a part of a general education.

As with the first assignment, further student reaction was provided on the course evaluations, in two forms: responses to the university-supplied question “I would recommend this instructor to other students” and response to the open-ended question “Would you recommend that I use the Schall book the next time I teach the course? Why or why not?”

The mean value of the students who responded SA or A to the overall impression statement from 19 semesters of Principles of Macroeconomics without the Schall book is 94 percent while the percentage of students responding SA or A during the Schall semester is 93 percent. While this indicator is not comprehensive it suggests that the assignment had at most a minor detrimental impact on the course evaluations.

The reaction from the student responses to the question “Would you recommend that I use the Schall book the next time I teach the course? Why or why not?” was 48 percent saying yes, 46 percent saying no, and 6 percent giving no opinion.⁸ Of those who said yes the most common explana-

tion indicated that the student appreciated the comments presented by Schall concerning the intellectual life and how to achieve it. Of those who said no the most common reasons were that Schall used too many unfamiliar words and/or that it seemed to have nothing to do with economics.

Lessons Learned

While incorporating insights from the first assignment helped to shrink the list of things that need improvement, this second assignment did yield some additional lessons:

- Using the “hook” of general education as a reason for appending a non-economics book to the course is sufficient to ward off many (although not all) of the “how come we have to read this?” type of questions.
- No matter how well motivated an assignment might be in the instructor’s mind, if students know that other instructors are not requiring it some of them will be angry at having to do it.
- Students should receive the grading rubric before the essays are turned in rather than when the essays are handed back. In other words, don’t wait until the stack of essays are staring you in the face to create a grading rubric!
- More work needs to be done to figure out how to *integrate* broader issues, like Christian themes or General Education concerns, into a Principles course.

IV. Summary

In general I would consider the assignments to be a success. In neither case were the outcomes that are looked at by outside evaluators (i.e., student responses on course evaluations) significantly lower than during non-assignment semesters. Thus one of the significant potential costs of the assignments was minimal. More important, the students were forced to stretch their perception of what economics is and how it fits into a bigger picture than otherwise would have been the case. Unfortunately fewer than half the students responded affirmatively when asked if they thought I should continue using the supplemental texts in future semesters. Perhaps this is due to the lack of motivation commonly present in students taking courses to fill a requirement rather than as part of chosen major field of study. (Very few of my principles students start out as economics majors.) Overall I think two key lessons come out of these assignments. First, no matter how much effort you put into motivating an assignment of the type described here, if students know that other instructors are not adding this to their courses you will generate a substantial amount of unhappiness among your students. Secondly, more work needs to be undertaken to figure out how to integrate

broader (e.g. Christian) themes into our economics courses rather than treating them as an add on.

Endnotes

- 1 Marshall (1948), p. 1.
- 2 Stapleford (2000).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The University of North Dakota, the largest school in the North Dakota University System, has approximately 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The Department of Economics is located in the College of Business and Public Administration. Business majors are required to take courses in principles of microeconomics and principles of macroeconomics. Business majors make up roughly 75 percent of the students enrolled in the principles courses, which have typical class sizes of 50–75 students.
- 5 Females were less happy with this assignment than males. Of the men 47 percent said yes; 44 percent said no; and 9 percent gave no opinion. Among women 35 percent said yes; 62 percent said no; and 4 percent gave no opinion.
- 6 Step 1 is self-discipline and Step 2 is the creation of a personal library. In addition, Schall mentions many books that ought to be a part of the student’s personal library.
- 7 Schall (2000), p. 2.
- 8 Males were less happy with this assignment than females. Of the men 39 percent said yes; 51 percent said no; and 10 percent gave no opinion. Among women 57 percent said yes; 40 percent said no; and 3 percent gave no opinion.

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