

A Fun Method of Engaging Students in the “Capitalism vs. Socialism” Discussion

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Abstract

Teaching involves various forms of standing in front of a class talking: podium or lecture, question or answer, group work and discussion. Another approach for millennial students is experiential, engaged, or Socratic style learning. The key to this form of teaching is using the student’s own words to define and discuss concepts, and using the students themselves to advance the discussion fundamental to the learning objectives. My main objective with this type of teaching is to help students engage in conversations while using and refining their critical thinking skills. Students who actively analyze socialism and capitalism using this type of self-education choose capitalism.

JEL Codes: A23, B0, F01

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I. Working with Millennial Students

If you have been teaching for more than a decade, you may have noticed a sea change in the type of students arriving on campus.¹ These new students, commonly referred to as millennials, are different.² They don’t like old-fashioned teaching methods. Sitting and listening to podium lectures drives them away, and question-and-answer lectures leave them inattentive. Millennial students want to be actively involved in the teaching process itself.

An alternative way of engaging students is to present dichotomously opposed economic concepts and have the students analyze them from a free-market entrepreneurship economy (capitalism) perspective versus a command-and-control economy (socialism) perspective.³ For example, Mackey and Sisodia (2013), in

¹ The millennial generation includes anyone born during the 1980s and 1990s.

² Levenson 2010, p. 1; Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons 2010, p. 1; Hershatter and Epstein 2010, p. 1; Considine, Horton, and Moorman 2009, p. 473.

³ I hesitate to use the words “capitalism” or “socialism” because their definitions have been so maligned that most students easily confuse them. So, step 1 of the

their book *Conscious Capitalism*, point out that a free-market entrepreneurship economy is *good* (because it creates value), *ethical* (because it is based on voluntary exchange), *noble* (because it elevates our existence), and *heroic* (because it lifts people out of poverty and creates prosperity). To deal with the different learning style of millennial students, I have adopted what was to me a new way of doing things and moved away from the traditional lecture approach. Rather than stand at the front of the classroom and tell them what they should think, I invite them to discuss and debate ideas of economics and political economy. I have my own views about economics and politics, but I find that students are more engaged in the learning process if they feel invited to share in and guide the classroom discussion. One could focus on opposing views in many areas, but I like to have students debate the relative merits of capitalism versus socialism. To do this, I divide the board in half, put “socialism” on the left side and “capitalism” on the right side, and write the four concepts listed earlier (good, noble, ethical, and heroic) on the capitalist side. I have students break into small working groups and send a representative to the board with their group’s definition of the words.⁴ I use this method of teaching in approximately 40 percent of my class days (about 13 days), and I spend the entire class time (about 1.25 hours) on this method to allow all students who wish to be heard to express their opinions.

II. Student Discussions

I then encourage students to debate and discuss whether they agree or disagree with the ideas put forth by Mackey and Sisodia and other authors on our reading list. The logic is that if free-market entrepreneurship is good, ethical, noble, and heroic, and you can measure the resulting elevation of living standards in the economy, then we must be able to define a command-and-control economy using the opposite words (bad, immoral or corrupt, unprincipled or unimpressive or petty, and cowardly or gutless) and be able to measure the corresponding poor results in the economy. Once all of

semester is to clearly parse the two words’ definitions. Not surprisingly, students quickly realize that there is a substantial difference between the two types of economic systems and their economic outcomes.

⁴ I encourage definitions to be two syllables or less and eliminate overlapping definitions. In this manner, students take complex ideas and strip them down to their basic meaning. I also have them define the antonym of each word to use in comparing capitalism and socialism.

this is written on the board and students are allowed the freedom to thoroughly discuss these concepts throughout the semester, the command-and-control advocates tend to be unable to explain how socialism does the same good job of creating value that capitalism does. Students clearly see the dichotomy when I lay out the two types of economic systems, with their respective highlights, side-by-side on the board. I have found this form of Socratic method to excel in involving the students in the “lecture” and I use it often during the semester. It allows them active participation in the discussion, defending their position using economic theory, logic, and critical thought.

III. Testing My Methods

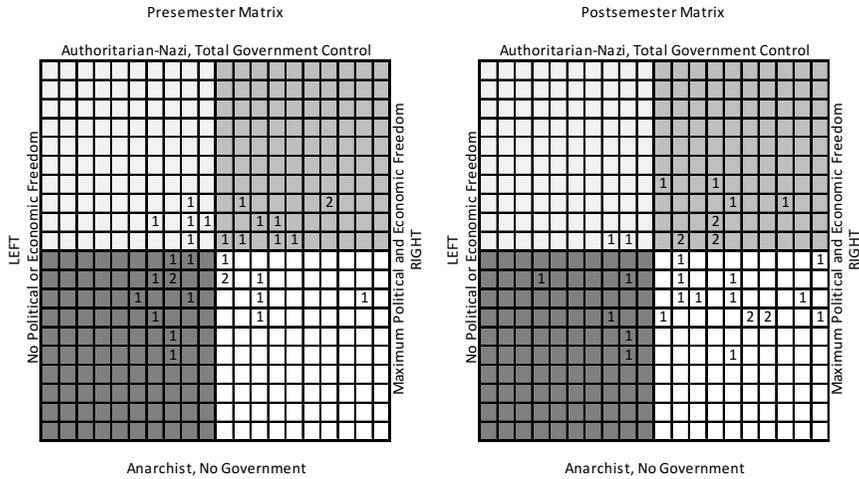
To test that this form of teaching has students become more aware and active in their own teaching, I have students participate in a pre- and postsemester awareness exercise using the test administered by the Political Compass website.⁵ The computer program administering the test also produces a matrix, similar to the two shown in figure 1, with the student’s dot positioned in the matrix according to his or her answers to the questions. Each student submits to me his or her matrix, and I aggregate the data for the pre- and postsemester matrices. After aggregating the data, I present the class political-compass-map (see figure 1).

The results are encouraging. After one semester, I found that the number of students in the libertarian right or the anarchist, limited-government-leaning box more than doubled compared to the beginning of the semester. Only two of the five students remained in the authoritarian left box at the end of the semester. The best part is that the students largely guided themselves and each other to these new beliefs, with me simply acting as the discussion leader and moderator. They may not end up quite as libertarian or anarchist as some would wish, but students went in that direction after reading about, discussing, and debating capitalist and socialist ideology.

⁵ The following are a few sample questions from the Political Compass test:

- i. Multinational companies are unethically exploiting the plant genetic resources of developing countries. (a) strongly disagree, (b) disagree, (c) agree, (d) strongly agree
- ii. A significant advantage of a one-party state is that it avoids all the arguments that delay progress in a democratic political system. (a) strongly disagree, (b) disagree, (c) agree, (d) strongly agree
- iii. Our civil liberties are being excessively curbed in the name of counter-terrorism. (a) strongly disagree, (b) disagree, (c) agree, (d) strongly agree

Figure 1. Political Compass Matrix



Source: Author’s data and calculations.

I have administered this test five times (pre- and postsemester in Spring 2013, pre- and postsemester in Fall 2013, and presemester in Fall 2014) and the results are encouraging. Over fifteen weeks, my students generally shift to favor a system encompassing more economic and political freedom—that is, capitalism. As Socrates said, “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.”

I also benefitted from teaching in this manner. My teaching evaluation scores have increased by nearly 30 percent and are now nearly maxed out since I began using this format. Students’ positive feedback has encouraged me to continue with this style of teaching.

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