

Jack Soper: A Pioneer in Economic Education

J. R. Clark

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Joshua C. Hall*

West Virginia University

Ashley S. Harrison

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Abstract

John “Jack” Soper passed away on August 9, 2013. A prolific researcher who retired as the John J. Kahl Sr. Chair in Entrepreneurship at John Carroll University, Soper was a leading light in the field of economic education. His scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s played a key role in establishing the field. We summarize and highlight his contributions to the measurement of economic literacy and the modeling of student learning in the collegiate and precollege classrooms.

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I. Introduction

Professor John “Jack” Soper passed away on August 9, 2013. Born on May 16, 1937, in Boston, Soper earned his BA in philosophy at Tufts and his MA and PhD in economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. A prolific researcher, he earned tenure at both Northern Illinois University and John Carroll University. At the latter institution, he rose quickly through the ranks, eventually becoming a full professor and holder of the John J. Kahl Sr. Chair in Entrepreneurship. John Carroll University honored Soper upon his

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retirement by giving him emeritus status and creating the John C. Soper Award in Social Entrepreneurship. A leading light in the field of economic education, Soper played an important role in establishing the field.

Jack also served several terms on the board of the Association of Private Enterprise Education (APEE), helping the young organization grow. In addition to his board duties, he was an active member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Private Enterprise*, helping to shape the journal's economic education section. As one longtime member told us, "He was a very positive influence on APEE for a very long time." Jack was the first to propose and insist upon APEE not running budgetary deficits—ever. As APEE attendees remember, he established a literal tradition of standing up at every APEE business meeting to inquire when APEE was going to go to a system of accrual accounting as opposed to accounting on a cash basis so that he could continue to bash APEE finances at will. In addition to his longtime service to the organization, he was a mentor and a guiding light to many of its members. APEE honored him with its Distinguished Scholar Award in 1994.

In this brief educational note, we summarize Soper's key contributions to the field of economic education and conclude with a few personal observations regarding the man and scholar.¹

II. Economic Man in the Classroom

From his earliest papers, Soper was concerned with better understanding what went on in the economics classroom at the college level and how it could be improved. In 1972, he published an article with Alan Nichols in the *Journal of Political Economy* titled "Economic Man in the Classroom." At the time, student evaluations of instructors were not widespread, and there was concern but little evidence that student evaluations were positively related to the instructor's giving of higher grades. Into the breach stepped Nichols and Soper (1972) with data from over 339 social science sections at Central Michigan University. They found that instructors giving

¹ While we try to cover the key themes of his economic education scholarship in this note, we could not cover everything, including his important work on gender and the study of economics (MacDowell 1977; Brenneke et al. 1978), exporting free market economics (Soper 1990), teaching a fractured macroeconomics (Soper 1987), the economics of outcome assessment (Soper 1999), and the link between private enterprise education and the transition from school to work (Rushing, Soper, and Vredevelde 1998).

grades that were one grade higher than average, other things being equal, could be expected to have a one-half point increase (on a four-point scale) in student evaluations of their teaching quality. This finding has subsequently been confirmed in a number of studies.² The next year Soper (1973a) published a follow-up paper on student evaluations in the *Journal of Economic Education* showing that there was no relationship between student evaluations and student learning. While this result ended up being atypical for studies on this topic, Soper was on the forefront of bringing an economist's eye and modeling to the issue.³

As was the case with grade inflation, Soper was also on the cutting edge of describing, disseminating, and evaluating other important trends in economic education during the 1970s. The widespread use of large lecture classes, especially at state universities trying to deal with the booming enrollments of the time, was forcing all instructors to try to find ways to economize on scarce classroom time while maintaining or improving student learning. One such approach was programmed instruction. Invented by B. F. Skinner, programmed instruction consists of a student self-teaching the material using a specialized text (or computer program) that students move at their own pace. Only after getting enough questions correct to exhibit understanding of a concept do they move on to the next concept. During the late 1960s and 1970s, there were sustained efforts to integrate programmed instruction into large lecture courses to teach basic concepts and definitions in order to free up class time for more difficult concepts (Attiyeh, Bach, and Lumsden 1969).

Soper contributed to the literature on programmed instruction in a number of ways. He analyzed data from principles of economics courses at University of Missouri-Columbia (1973b), where programmed instruction was paired with regular lectures and quizzes. Employing regression analysis, he found that the programmed instruction package had a significant positive impact on a number of student output measures. Building off this paper, Soper and Thornton (1976) would later look at the effect of a completely self-paced macroeconomic course using programmed instruction. They found that it was not a good substitute for a conventional lecture-discussion course, although their results could not compare with the type of hybrid course discussed in Soper (1973b). In a similar vein,

² See, for example, McPherson (2006).

³ See Becker and Watts (1999) for a discussion of the literature showing a positive relationship between student evaluations and student achievement.

Soper (1974) surveyed the literature on computer-assisted instruction. In a conclusion that would make any economist proud, he noted that while many studies find computer-assisted instruction to be positively related to a control group, all the studies at the time failed to account for the fact that computer-assisted instruction had considerably higher costs to the instructor!⁴

During this period of his career, perhaps because he was reading a lot of the second-generation literature in economic education, Soper turned his eye toward writing a series of papers designed to improve the field.⁵ His earliest paper in this category is Soper (1976), where he makes the case for increased sophistication of theoretical models used in the literature as well as empirical techniques. Partly written as a response to a criticism of Soper (1973b) raised by William Becker, Soper used the occasion to demonstrate that many inconsistencies in the literature of the time were due to issues of multicollinearity, specification error, and insufficient student data. While quaint from today's vantage point of high-speed desktop computers and off-the-shelf econometric programs, Soper was at the forefront of telling economic educators to listen to econometricians. Soper and Brenneke (1985, 1987) are other important contributions in this area as they walk economic educators through the validity of tests of economic understanding. Similarly, Soper and Walstad (1983) seeks to improve the measuring of attitudes about economics among students and the general population.

Soper was especially involved in improving the economic understanding of elementary and secondary education students. A first step in improving their economic understanding was having a good test of their knowledge that was nationally normed (Chizmar and Soper 1981). In addition to being involved in the creation of the *Test of Economic Literacy* (Soper 1978) used extensively at the secondary level, Soper would go on to evaluate the training of high school economics instructors using the test. Soper and Brenneke (1981) evaluated the Joint Council on Economic Education's program for

⁴ This insight highlights how Jack Soper was strong in ideas and personality. Jack was a hulk of a man at 6'6" and 250 lbs. He worked his way through college driving a taxi on the midnight shift in Boston, and he was well known for abruptly stopping the cab and literally tossing unruly passengers to the curb. For those who knew him later as a discussant, this history should be no surprise.

⁵ In the mid-1970s, Jack was known to appear on the programs of every major economic conference in the country sporting mutton chops, a white polyester leisure suit, and white, high heeled, patent leather shoes.

improving the economics curriculum in high schools: the Developmental Economic Education Program (DEEP). They found that attending a DEEP school and taking an economics course explained 13.5 percent of the variance in scores on the *Test of Economic Literacy*. The next two decades of Soper's career in economic education were spent on better understanding, evaluating, and improving precollege education, often with longtime collaborator William Walstad (Brenneke et al. 1988; Walstad and Soper 1982; Soper and Walstad 1988a, 1988b; Walstad and Soper 1988a, 1988b; Walstad and Soper 1989). Much of what we know about precollege economic illiteracy is based on their scholarship.⁶

III. Concluding Thoughts

Jack Soper made everything he touched better. As a young scholar, he was instrumental in advancing the field of economic education. During the 1970s, he contributed the modeling structure for much of the basic economic education research being conducted today. At that time, research in economic education was in its infancy and not at all respected within the profession. He capitalized upon this liability by seeking out controversy and accurately critiquing the work of others in a brutal and relentless manner. To say he suffered fools poorly is an understatement. While others might be more subtle and supportive in their critique of research, Jack was fond of statements such as “Professor Such and Such, the first derivative of the right hand side of your equation requires division by zero, and thus your presentation is indeed wasting the time of everyone here. Can we please move on to the next paper?” This critical, no-nonsense attitude was crucial to the field of economic education at the time.⁷

⁶ This literature has sometimes been used to inform efforts to make states require an economics course as a high school graduation requirement. Soper and Lynn (1994) show that the effects of requiring an economics course are a mixed bag because of the negative effect of the mandates themselves on learning.

⁷ Jack would plant in most of his papers at least one statement or description of his results designed to tempt and attract the unthoughtful criticism of his opponents—to which, of course, he already had an answer. Someone might criticize his work with a statement like, “Professor Soper, this is a rather unique application of OLS techniques, and due to your surprisingly high R-squared, my suspicions are that you have a multicollinearity problem.” He gleefully would answer with something like, “Yes, I had the same suspicion back when I was as ignorant and thoughtless as you, and of course, like any competent *economist*, I ran the cross matrix of partials to demonstrate otherwise. If you might have even glanced at the footnote on page ___ of your handout, you would have known that and saved yourself the embarrassment of such a foolish statement. Next question please?”

Similarly, APEE needed the close attention to its finances that he provided during his early years with the organization. As the association matured and grew, he mellowed into the supportive and prolific senior professor that most everyone came to know him as. While his scholarship in economic education continues to gather citations, his ultimate legacy lives on today in APEE's prosperity and its culture of supporting young scholars in the way he supported us and countless others. He will be missed.

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