

Getting Students To Think Outside The Box

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Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy identifies six different levels of student learning (Bloom, 1956). A course employing his concepts develops a lesson plan whereby students are moved from lower order learning objectives (knowledge, comprehension, application) to higher order learning objectives (analysis, synthesis, evaluation). This note presents an example of one such lesson plan, The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 with subsequent amendments.

The Fair Labor Standards Act (hereafter FLSA) is an example of a price floor or minimum wage. What follows assumes students have had prior exposure to, and mastery of, the concepts of demand and supply analysis, price floors and ceilings, price elasticity of demand, and the basic decision rules of economics. This provides students with a mechanism for developing their own positions on economic issues to the level that they are able to defend such positions.

Bloom's taxonomy contains six learning objectives: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The first three are lower-order objectives while the latter three are considered

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higher-order objectives. We provide a brief definition of each objective, an example drawn from the FLSA case study and a means of assessing students' mastery of each learning objective.

Knowledge includes the recall of specific and isolable bits of information [Bloom, pp. 62-88]. By the end of the lesson students should be able to recall specific pieces of information about the FLSA such as: 1) What is the specific title of the act? 2) When was

the FLSA enacted? and 3) List three specific problems that resulted in the enactment of the FLSA. These questions may be given in the form of either multiple or fill-in-the-blank questions. Comprehension includes three types of behavior, the first being translation, which means that an individual can translate a communication into another language. The second behavior is interpretation, which can reorder ideas in order for others to better understand them. The third type of behavior is extrapolation, which include predictions based on an understanding of the trends or conditions described in the communication [Bloom, pp. 89- 119].

By the end of the presentation a student should be able to explain, in her/his own words, the basic principles of the FLSA to another student. The mastery of this learning objective may be assessed in one of two ways. First, we may ask a student to explain the basic principles of the FLSA to another student in the class; or, second, as part of an examination we may ask the students to write a short paragraph in which the basic principles of the FLSA are identified and explained. The application shows that the student can use the abstraction appropriately [Bloom, pp. 120 B 143]. By the end of the presentation students should be expected to recognize that the legislation associated with the FLSA as well as agricultural price supports are applications of the principles of a price floor. The students should be able to construct graphs depicting the application of a price floor to labor and agricultural markets. As part of an examination we would ask students multiple-choice questions based on graphs dealing with price floors.

Analysis concerns the meaning and intent of the material. It brings to bear the appropriate generalizations or principles upon the given material. Analysis includes breaking down the material into its constituent parts and detecting the relationships of the parts [Bloom, pp. 144 B 161]. By the end of the exercise we should expect students to identify the principal underlying assumptions of the FLSA legislation and the intended as well as unintended consequences of these assumptions. One assumption is the price elasticity of demand for labor. Policy makers typically assume labor is price inelastic over the relevant price range embodied in the proposed legislation. A second assumption is the difference between the nominal value of

the minimum wage and the real value of the minimum wage. By the end of the presentation we expect the students to differentiate clearly between those two concepts and be able to provide empirical evidence on the real value of the minimum wage. As part of an examination we would ask students to answer one or more essay questions on this topic.

Synthesis is defined as putting together parts so as to form a whole. Generally it involves a recombination of parts of previous experiences with new material, reconstructed into a new and more or less well-integrated whole [Bloom, pp. 162B184]. Students are expected to be able to identify the principal components of the process through which a price floor can be enacted, in this process explaining the role played by vested interest groups. The process assumes the existence of a market failure in that individuals in the labor market are not able to earn a living wage. Second, by the end of the presentation the students should be expected to identify the principal counter-arguments to the need for a minimum wage as well as how vested interest groups develop and disseminate such counter-arguments. As part of a term project we would ask students to review the legislative history of the FLSA and identify the principal arguments for and against the FLSA.

Evaluation is defined as the making of judgments about the value of ideas, works, solutions, methods, materials, etc. It employs criteria for appraising the extent of the effectiveness of the program. Judgments may be either quantitative or qualitative, and the criteria may be either those determined by the student or those which are given to him [Bloom, pp. 185B200]. While the use of graphs may not be required, students would be encouraged to use them to illustrate their arguments. By the end of the presentation the students should be able to evaluate the benefits and costs of FLSA. As part of a term project we would ask students the potential benefits and costs of enacting a minimum wage.

Conclusion

In this paper we have developed a practical teaching exercise that uses the minimum wage. This particular topic was chosen to make use of two of the basic principles of microeconomics, demand

curves and price elasticity of demand, and employs the three lower-order learning objectives to assess student mastery of the material. Second, the application reduces the danger of teaching economics in the abstract, giving the principles of economics pragmatic meaning. Third, students should develop a simplified model scripted by assumptions, body (explain and predict), and policy. This process uses the three higher-order learning objectives we have identified. Students are asked to formulate two, contrasting models B as proponents and as opponents of a minimum wage. This process helps students to appreciate the normative aspects of the public policy side of economics, also reinforcing real economic experiences. Alternative explanations allow students to develop a Acritical eye.@ This process forces students to realize the fact that the economy does not operate in a vacuum. Vested interest groups play a vital role in translating economic ideas into legislation.

Finally, the comparison of the two policy-oriented models, one for and the other against the minimum wage, is the very essence of evaluation. To be able to analytically compare, to rate concepts against one another, and to debate policy issues, provides students with the opportunity to move from lower-order to higher-order learning objectives. The abstract differences between income and substitution effects become meaningful for students when they are forced to defend their chose position on the FLSA. In this way students become better equipped for the free-ranging debates that occur in their chosen careers and, hopefully, become more effective participants in the political process.

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