

The Student I Used To Be
– Reflections Of A Graduate Teaching Assistant in Economics

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The child is the father of the man.
-Brian Wilson

Abstract

This essay is a personal reflection on the importance of teaching economics, the present lack of incentives in promoting teaching quality in higher education, and the naturally unique role of teaching assistants.

1. Incentives and the unique role of GTAs

Teaching is one of the most important institutions in modern societies. Its significance lies with the need for continuous investment in human capital to promote growth and increase well-being. This fact has led societies to regulate teaching across the different stages of the education path to provide teaching incentives.

Progress from primary to higher education implies a continuously raising level of specialization for both pupils and teachers, as well as different incentives for the latter. The role of a teacher in primary education is to give pupils a general knowledge, such as reading and writing. At the same time the teacher has to help the pupils integrate in the society they live in by transmitting to them a set of rules, values and common background. In other words, the teacher is also responsible to create a common identity to the students. The incentives for becoming a good teacher are both intrinsic (that is, a need to improve one's society and the well-being of the pupils) as well as external (salary, pension and threat of unemployment). These incentives are complementary and aligned with each other.

At the other extreme of the teaching path, in higher education, the situation is quite different. The teachers/academics are often considered the 'cream' of society and are the offspring of a 20+ - year old educational system. As such, their role is dual. On the one hand, academics are expected to produce innovative research on highly specialized topics to promote societal growth and well-being, while, on the other hand, they are expected to facilitate the continuous flow of highly skilled individuals who can one day substitute the existing academics.¹ And here is the point where the problem arises. The two roles for academics are conflicting: high-quality teaching requires time and devotion as does innovative research.

¹ Throughout this essay I will use the word 'academic' to define all academic staff in higher education without distinguishing between lecturers, senior lecturers, readers and professors (for the U.S. system assistant professors, associate professors and full professors analogously).

As the ‘cream’ of society, demand on academics for innovative research is often great. Society’s short-term needs are mirrored in the existing incentive scheme for academics which views innovative research as the primary objective. Universities offer positions and promotions to academics on the basis of one’s publication record and, most often than not, place little emphasis on academics’ teaching abilities. The same applies for funding from research bodies. It is safe to say therefore, that, at best, teaching quality is a secondary goal which is only pursued when one has been offered an academic position and which rarely overshadows the primary goal of research (i.e. an established good researcher is unlikely to be penalized for low-quality teaching).

The conflicting incentives create a problem for societies and the policy maker. However, this is not the only problem from a society’s point of view. Another related matter regards efficiency and the waste of resources on low-quality teaching; students invest a good part of their families’ wealth in studying. If they do not receive a good education in return the resources are better spent on other activities.

So how can one balance these two important issues? Perhaps a natural remedy to the problem is the employment of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). A GTA also faces the strong external motivation to publish his or her research. However, the GTA has a higher return from reading and teaching than an established academic, being at the beginning of his academic career, due to the accumulation of knowledge. Moreover, quality teaching can serve as a quick signal to the established academics of a department of a potentially good future economist.

It is perhaps not unrealistic to assume that the intrinsic motivation of GTAs to help students might be greater than of the established academics. After all, GTAs were sitting in classrooms until recently; they faced the same dilemmas about their future perspectives, and might still remember how they themselves struggled with a specific topic. They are likely to still have a vivid memory of the things they found annoying in their lecturers and are, thus, more likely to be self-critical. It seems, therefore, that GTAs should not only play a passive role (e.g. simply solve exercises in seminars), but they can actively complement the established academics experience.

2. From Theory to Practice

2.1 The student that I used to be

I have been a GTA for almost 4 years now. In these 4 years I have taught microeconomics (second years), quantitative methods (first years), industrial organization (third years) and experimental economics (workshops). The nature of these topics differ and so do the additional things that a GTA can offer when teaching them. In my brief experience it seems that introductory courses are more abstract (in general) than more applied courses offered to finalists and, hence, less intuitive and difficult to motivate; difficult, not impossible! On the other hand, teaching finalists implies sometimes teaching to students tired from 3 years of “useless models” – at least this is how some of

my finalist students describe their 3-year experience with economics. The great thing is that ... I agree.

I spent 5 years studying economics prior to my PhD (in the country where I come from undergraduate education lasts four years). Those 5 years were largely spent brainlessly learning things which made no real sense. And then one day, very close to the end of my education (finally as I thought) I took part in a classroom experiment. We were divided into two groups: half served as buyers and half as sellers. We were given secret reservation values and costs of production and were set free to strike deals in the classroom with members of the other group. How much more enjoyable was it to try to make deals with my friends than to sit and hear someone talk. However, the real surprise came when I found out at the end of the experiment that our behaviour perfectly complied with the law of supply and demand. This was, after all, the famous experiment of Vernon Smith (*Nobel Laureate 2002*).

From that point on economics were never the same again. A little later I came across a paper which showed me that, not only could economics be applied (and, why not, be fun), but also that many of the questions that always bothered my brain all my life (like why do people jump the queue in my country and why aren't people punishing them) could be answered through economic theory and its tools. That was a revelation and I signed up for a PhD.

2.2 Teaching

I commenced research very anxious to answer as many questions as possible. Soon I realized that a lot of the things I needed in order to answer these questions were offered but not picked up at the previous 5 years. That was a disappointment, but was it my fault completely?

Teaching undergraduates gave me the chance to fill in most of the gaps in my knowledge. But most importantly it allowed me to help the students who looked the most to the student that I used to be.² The student I used to be pointed out to the students who just wanted to solve the exercise and memorize it for the exams; the students who did not understand why we studied the models that we did; the students who did not realize that at the end of their degree they will be sorry for all the lost time; the students who thought that economics had nothing to do with reality. Preparing a class I always ask: "What would I make of this as a student?" Then, like a good economist, I work *backwards*. To complement lectures and abstract models I use classroom experiments, every-day examples (if possible from the recent news) and I ask students a lot of questions that go beyond the narrow limits of the exercises. The students seem to enjoy this.

3. Conclusion

GTAs have a natural role in students' education. The little time separating them from the time they were sitting in classrooms, as well as the higher intrinsic motivation makes

² This does not mean that I discriminated between students, but rather that I was a very unmotivated and lost student.

them an essential complement in teaching in higher education. In my opinion, the best strategy for a GTA is to remember the student that he used to be.