



It is still contested whether economics should be taught at the school level. Many people feel that economics as a special subject similar to math, history or geography does not merit a place in the curriculum. The school curriculum ought to retain its focus on the development of basic abilities and skills. They feel that the time diverted to teaching economics could be better utilized in acquiring skills like math and language and to attain a mastery over them. Others feel that economics has much to contribute to understanding the modern world and this should be a part of a citizen's training. Besides, it also contributes to the training in logical reasoning. The critiques however add that the abstraction of the economic models and their slippery ground of assumptions are not appropriate for school level introduction. There's a grain of truth on either side. Therefore, what should be debated is the nature of economics for schools.

Upper Primary Stage

When Eklavya developed social science textbooks for the Upper Primary Stage (UPS) economics figured as a component of the civics syllabus. This inclusion was based on the understanding that all students should have the opportunity to acquire basic principles necessary for elementary economic and social understanding. There were many themes that could draw upon the economic discipline to illumine aspects of social and economic life. The mandate, however, was not to teach economics as such.



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This understanding emerged out of trials & discussions with resource people and coming to grips with the approach to social sciences at the upper primary level. The book edited by Dr Poonam Batra, 'Social Science Learning in Schools, Perspective and Challenges' documents many chapters that

didn't work and reflects on this experience. The learning from this program was enriched over the years through actual teaching and follow-up in a sample of government schools & regular teacher trainings.

The NCF 2005 debated the purpose of the civics course, which according to the earlier Yashpal Committee report (1992-93) had been reduced to teaching meaningless rituals and still exhibited the colonial framework of converting people into "loyal citizens". The new conceptualization emerging from these deliberations attempts to break away from this tradition. Civics has been renamed as social and political Life at the UPS (and political science in higher grades). Civics in the new avatar of social and political life has within it many topics from sociology, gender, media and subaltern studies as also economics. The economics component of "Social and Political Life" textbooks, though small, is significant.

In the new NCERT textbook for class 6, students are introduced to a variety of livelihoods in the rural and urban areas. The diversity of contexts are then meaningfully used to draw distinction between farm and non-farm activities, farmers and laborers, self-employed and wage-employed, formal and informal workers and also discuss issues such as dearth of work, differing terms and conditions of work, etc.

The next two years of UPS are devoted to understanding the two major organizing principles of our economy, markets and the government, in a contemporary setting. Beginning with the physical notion of market as a place of exchange (example of 'haat', 'mandi', local shops, mall), the unit on markets goes on to discuss how markets function both in terms of connecting distant producers and buyers on the one hand and also creating vastly different opportunities for them.

The discussion on government in grade VIII takes cognizance of government failure in some of the important roles that it is supposed to take on such as universal provision of public facilities and regulation of economic activities, while emphasizing that these are roles it is constitutionally bound to honor – in order to achieve a decent quality of life for all.

In tune with the overall emphasis of these texts, a political economy approach was adopted for the economics sections. Admittedly, the analytical categories used are not always simple, but the use of a variety of cases before generalizing and the near complete absence of formal jargon is supposed to make the topics interesting and comprehensible for the students.

The treatment is focused on real examples and real life situations, starting from the familiar ones to more complex situations. These are then juxtaposed against questions on social ethics such as “would you consider this a fair price?”, “who are the people benefiting?”, “did people get justice in this case?” Seen from another angle, rather than discuss the ideas of democracy, equality, secularism and social justice as mere constitutional ideals (the usual trend for civics syllabus in India), their meanings are explored through the life experiences of ordinary people in an everyday setting.

What Should be the Approach at the Secondary Level?

In the United States, the National Council on economics Education provides a set of concepts for teaching economics in schools below the college level. This lists the important economic concepts for early development of critical thinking and decision-making skills such as opportunity cost, marginal analysis, interdependence, exchange, productivity, money, markets and prices. Macroeconomic topics are introduced later. This framework places economic freedom and economic efficiency as the two most important social goals for an economy.

In contrast, from its inception in 1977, the economics textbook at the secondary level brought out by the NCERT has taken an original approach, quite different from the utilitarian framework laid above. Taking a broad view of development that would mean not only growth but also social justice, institutional and structural features of the economy were laid out with care and related to the constraints on development. The issue of employment (or the lack of it) received adequate emphasis and public policy intervention had an important place in the discussions, besides the role played by the market. ‘Our Economy: an introduction’ did set the tone for high school economics in India and all the subsequent attempts at textbook writing have followed the overall framework proposed in this book

With all its merits, however, this book would not qualify as

a beginner’s text judged even by the most conservative pedagogical standards. Learning for all age groups requires plenty of experience and thinking through concrete situations in order to come to grips with the facts and events of life upon which concepts and theories are based. The need for a concrete sense of economic life is even greater for younger age groups. ‘Our Economy’ had far too many concepts introduced all at once with few examples and applications. The language was terse and technical. The implication was that teachers teaching the book, most of them were not economics teachers, would teach by bracketing the text and students would memorize for examinations. If the author’s emphasis was on conceptual understanding, it achieved exactly the opposite result.

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The pedagogical shifts as required by the NCF (2005) – the leading document for the new set of NCERT textbooks – were therefore long awaited and most welcome. This had been explored by many groups, including Eklavya. It required that the nature of textbooks change fundamentally towards conceptual development and critical thinking in students and away from rote learning. The process of textbook writing was also made more democratic by having teams rather than an individual to draw up the curriculum, write and review the textbooks.

If we see the high school economics course with the themes covered at the UPS stage we would find that the conceptual areas are broadened and some of the formal economics usages are introduced so that the learner can relate this knowledge to what they hear in the media/adult conversations. But abstractions are still few, there is no formal theory and all themes retain practical relevance. It is geared towards general education. We must keep in mind that economics is a part of the social science course and shares this space along with history, geography & political science.

One reason why the earlier NCERT textbook was not appropriate for learners at that stage lies in the book trying to provide students with a core knowledge of economics (though this objective remains largely unstated). In a significant departure, the new NCERT curriculum for high school economics has dropped this agenda. Instead the aim now is to introduce students to the ways of thinking adopted in economics.



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In what educationists call the thematic approach, the curriculum is organized around themes that connect conceptual categories to authentic learning contexts. The advantages of thematic approach are twofold. First, the learner starts from a real context/situation, which may reflect many of his own experiences and therefore provides a convenient (and far more interesting) entry point into a topic. Second, the conceptual areas can be determined by what aspects of economic reality one is considering, rather than the conceptual areas leading the horse, as has been the case most often. This approach has led to smaller conceptual load and greater use of real contexts and situations in the new economics textbooks.

Students (and teachers) have some initial hesitation and difficulty in engaging with the generalized picture, they do ultimately work through the numbers and graphs and the economic logic. A balance between specific illustrations and the generalized picture therefore is what is necessary and would enable the students to relate everyday economic activity to the workings of the economy. How to achieve this is the big challenge. Without the macro view, an understanding of the Indian economy would be incomplete,

but one needs to keep in mind that a macro perspective does not come easily. For instance, many students and teachers have personal experiences of labor shortages. They have difficulty coming to terms with the characterization of the Indian economy as labor surplus and unemployment as “the” major problem facing the economy. To take another example, while students easily understand the function of banks as financial intermediaries, they fail to appreciate that demand deposits are a form of money. There are many such examples where the macro perspective might be at variance with intuitive knowledge. This is the other challenge for curriculum designers.

For long, educationists have held that it is important to give students an understanding of the fundamental structure of whatever we teach. What is the logic behind it and how does this apply in different situations? To cite an example from economics, an understanding of terms such as credit and how it varies across classes of borrowers depending on their socio-economic status will mean learning a structure. It can be extended in many other situations such as analyzing the problem of farmer’s suicide, and rural indebtedness to a study of interlinked markets and agrarian relations in later training.

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The major thrust of social science curriculum has remained utilitarian in nature. It puts more emphasis on developmental issues that are important but not sufficient to understand the normative dimension – issues of equality, justice and dignity. This has been a major source of criticism. Concerns have been voiced on the nature of economics discourse both from outside and within the discipline for quite some time now. How does one bring in issues of social ethics? This also requires an inter-disciplinary approach so that the overall social science course in history, political science, geography and economics hold together. More can be done

at this end.

Linking Textbooks, Teacher Training and Examination

Given that the classroom teaching learning processes are dependent upon among other things the level of training imparted to teachers and the assessment pattern followed; unfortunately we have created a culture where genuine involvement of teachers is missing. At an academic level, teachers have little opportunity to understand the approach to social sciences informed by the current contributions of research. Therefore, an engagement with the perspective that has informed the current changes cannot be imagined. Coupled with this, since the assessment pattern continues to depend largely on recall and assigned marks for chapters, conceptual understanding has virtually taken a back seat.

Controversy at the Higher Secondary Stage

At the middle and secondary stages economics is taught as part of the social science course. At the higher secondary stage there's an opportunity to specialize and therefore students need to be introduced to a more formal course. But how should this be thought about?

In a recent controversy economics teachers teaching grade XII have objected to the new mathematical versions of micro and macro and have forced the CBSE to allow books other than those published by the NCERT to be officially taught in schools (within the prescribed syllabus). This amounts to de facto scrapping of the new textbooks. A committee looking into the matter has desired to reinstate these books. The academics reacted saying that teachers do not wish to be rigorous in their approach. Some college teachers commented that we are installing a fear for economics similar to that of math.

Having said that, higher secondary course cannot be a watered down version of the undergraduate course as it currently is, with four different papers (statistics, Indian economy, micro and macro) with little or few linkages between these subjects. There is an urgent need to think afresh. What is the motivation for studying economics? This might be a question relevant to ask - more so for the beginner or a young student. We must use the controversy as an opportunity to creatively engage with this issue. Indeed a lot more needs to be done to reassure young students that economics is worth studying early on.

Author's Note

This article is adapted & modified version of the article "Teaching economics in Schools", Sukanya Bose & Arvind Sardana, EPW, Aug 9, 2008.

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