Foreword

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My first thought on reading these interviews was that people who like teaching turn out to be good teachers. Then, like any well-trained economist, I worried about reverse causation: maybe naturally good teachers end up enjoying teaching. In the absence of a structural model, I'll settle for the correlation. Pleasure in teaching and competence in teaching are associated.

Any young or old teacher of economics can learn something from these interviews. (Fully one-third of the subjects did their graduate work at MIT, said he with a smile.) I am not thinking of little hints or recipes about classroom technique, but rather about mind-sets and attitudes. For instance, good teaching is clearly hard work. Every one of these good teachers thinks seriously about the function and structure of the course, and then prepares each lecture or class with forethought and care. A good teacher can't just follow a text, useful as a text may be for some purposes, because a good teacher has his or her own coherent view of what this stuff is all about and where it is going. That is why teaching a course a couple of times is so educational for the teacher. I always felt that approximately the third time I taught a course was the best, because I really understood the material and its lessons. After that, a little bit of boredom might creep in, and it was time to look for some new problems and some new angles for next time.

All this is quite separate from style and manner of teaching. Paul Samuelson and I usually saw eye-to-eye about what mattered in economics, and how to go about finding answers to questions. But we had quite different teaching styles, and would have given different answers to some of Professor Bowmaker's questions. Not everyone, in fact hardly anyone, can be Dan Hamermesh or Nancy Folbre or David Laibson; but everyone can work that hard.

Bowmaker asks each of his interviewees for an opinion on an old question: the rival or complementary relation between research and teaching. The answers tend to favor complementarity, with occasional remarks going the other way. It seems to me that there are two or even three quite

separate things going on. If you are teaching a specialized course, you will probably do a better job if you have been doing research in the field. You are more likely to know where the bodies are buried, as well as where the exciting ideas are, and you should (repeat, should) have some conception of the field as a whole. In the other direction, I think teaching a course well, even at the undergraduate level, is a very good way to see where the holes are, both in theory and in getting a grip on real magnitudes, and that is a good way to latch on to promising research ideas.

Nevertheless, teaching and research are both drains on a common pool of time and energy, and it would be foolish not to recognize that fact. Corner solutions are not the answer: for everyone or nearly everyone, the marginal, least interesting research project is less valuable than teaching a good course to interested students. These interviews suggest that the scholars and institutions involved have arrived at a viable allocation.

It would be useful to have some similar interviews with teachers of economics at good liberal arts colleges. Many able high school graduates prefer to start there. It seems likely that the large production of new PhDs and the availability of data and facility of distant collaboration via the Internet have, between them, broadened the playing field for combining teaching and research to include more of the better liberal arts colleges, even if the mix there will always be slightly different.

One last thought: just about every one of these experienced teachers has something interesting to say about the relation between classroom economics and current events. They do not all say the same things, nor should they: their own ways of doing economics and the details of their own fields constrain what makes sense for them. But they have all thought about the question, and how an answer should be reflected in their teaching.

Outsiders looking at academic economics see an equation or two and recoil at what they think of as "formalism." We think we know better. To write down a demand equation and a supply equation is not formalism in any meaningful sense; it is just a way of accepting that prices and quantities are numerical. There is indeed formalism, true formalism, in economics but it is a minority taste. It seems to me that one of the things we ought to teach our students, at every level, is a grown-up attitude about the relation between theory and practice. Only a small part of this is the business of econometrics. The rest is an essential part of applied economics. It is a point of substance, not methodology.

So thinking about the teaching of economics is closely connected with thinking about economics.

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