



# The Heart of Teaching Economics: Lessons from Leading Minds

*Simon W. Bowmaker. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2010; 392 pages*  
*Reviewed by Sandra Odorzynski*

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Looking to discover or reaffirm the heart of teaching economics? Then turn the anatomically correct cover on Simon Bowmaker's volume, where twenty-one prominent economists share their thoughts on the matter. The book is organised into three parts: *Fundamentals* with interviews of Robert Frank, John B. Taylor, Steven Landsburg, and Robert J. Gordon; *Tools* with interviews of Benjamin Polak, William Greene, and David Laibson; and *Applications* with interviews of Steven Medema, Barry Eichengreen, Carolyn Hoxby, Daniel Hamermesh, Edward Glaeser, Luís Cabral, Shoshana Grossbard, David Cutler, Nancy Folbre, John List, David Friedman, Gene Grossman, William Easterly, and Frederic Mishkin. The interviews were conducted face-to-face over the period March to July 2009, and centered on seven lines of inquiry: background information, general thoughts on teaching, the learning process, teaching philosophy and technique, course content and design, textbooks, and teaching economics in the future. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, then only lightly edited to preserve the essence and spirit of the conversations.

The author claims four motivations for this book: "first, to present economists with a unique and rare opportunity to talk about teaching; second, to discover how they interpret, understand and practice their role as teachers; third, to learn lessons that can inform other people's teaching; and fourth, to shatter the illusion that teaching and research are strictly independent and competing activities" (Introduction, pg. x). In successfully achieving these goals, Bowmaker offers teaching academics, be they freshly minted or highly seasoned, the opportunity to learn from the masters. As Robert M. Solow says in his Foreword, it is not just "...little hints or recipes about classroom technique, but rather about mind-sets and attitudes" (p. vii).

Due to the light use of editing, the spontaneity of the interviews shines through, giving the reader the sense that s/he is just at the next table, perhaps in a coffee shop, casually eavesdropping on intellectual conversations with leading minds in economics. Several themes unfold as the interviews are compared. For example, when asked what they like most about teaching, many said it was seeing the light bulb go on in their students' eyes, or the *aha* moment that students experience when they *get it*. Daniel Hamermesh adapts an old line he attributes to the Jesuits: "Give me your son when he is three and you can have him back when he is seven: he is mine for life. That's especially true in introductory economics" (p. 198). William Greene sums it up best: "When a student says, 'now I get it, now I understand', there is no feeling that beats that. That's opium, it really is" (p. 103).

Most of the interviewees confess they have little formal knowledge about how humans learn. Nancy Folbre says "I know from talking with Bob Frank, and from reading what he writes, that it's important to engage students' curiosity about the world around them" (p. 290). John List credits Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy with demonstrating to him the value of explaining economics at an intuitive level. The use of active learning techniques is frequently mentioned, with John List quoting Benjamin Franklin: "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn." Sometimes that involvement

might include a Razor Scooter and rap song, complete with drooping pants, or California raisins – see the chapters featuring Daniel Hamermesh and John Taylor for more information. Personal anecdotes and gems too numerous to mention are sprinkled throughout the book.

Responses to the question about research and teaching being competitive or complementary are wide-ranging and relevant, particularly for academics facing rising institutional expectations in both areas over time. Robert Solow points out that “... teaching and research are both drains on a common pool of time and energy, and it would be foolish not to recognize that fact.” But he also argues that “Corner solutions are not the answer...” and “These interviews suggest that the scholars and institutions involved have arrived at a viable allocation” (Foreword, p. viii).

Looking to the teaching of economics in the future, several interviewees made the case that economics will (or should) play a stronger role in education and society. Benjamin Polak says: “We’re seeing two phenomena at the same time: the social sciences are expanding enormously in university education and economics is expanding as a toolkit, as a technique, as a set of standards if you like, with the social sciences” (p. 99). Nancy Folbre argues that social science is not keeping pace with the problems being generated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She suggests that much can be learned from economists’ studies of race and gender, and those insights are transferable to issues of environmental instability, extreme income inequality, and intensified military and ethnic conflicts across the globe.

This book is highly recommended for anyone who aspires to be or already is engaged in the art of teaching economics at the undergraduate or graduate level. Novice and veteran teachers will both come away with fresh perspectives on best practices in the field. It would be useful as well to high school teachers and trainers of teachers, although several questions from the interview script are not relevant to the work that those professionals perform. Three-fourths of the interviewees are associated with private universities, with the remaining at public institutions. Since all twenty-one teach at research universities, the insights they provide resonate most strongly for academics with similar affiliations. However, this reviewer, a lifelong academic at small, liberal arts institutions, found the volume to be highly engaging and applicable to that environment. Perhaps Bowmaker has a sequel in mind for those of us who toil in those trenches.

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