

Personal Anecdotes as a Pedagogical Device to Motivate Introductory Economics

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Abstract. A personal anecdote is a short narrative about one's life experiences. When used in the context of teaching introductory courses in economics, it facilitates a vivid, engaging, and memorable way for students to learn fundamental economic concepts. As a pedagogical device, it encourages classroom discussions, motivates students to recognize the relevance and application of economic analysis in their lives, and humanizes the instructor's persona. Some guidelines and caveats are proffered to enhance its appropriate use.

Keywords: personal anecdotes; introductory economics; pedagogical device; student motivation; learning

Introduction

Courses in introductory economics, otherwise known as principles of economics, are often viewed with a mix of excitement and trepidation by students (Brock, 2011). The excitement often stems from the "macro side" of economics. Students who formally enroll in the course often have at least some familiarity or even a faint notion of the jargon of macroeconomics. They recognize, for instance, from reading the newspaper and watching political-economic commentary, that inflation and unemployment are considered as social problems, that exchange rates are useful when traveling abroad, and that the government needs to do something about the burgeoning budget deficit. Although students have varying knowledge and perceptions of economics (Shanahan and Meyer, 2001), classroom discussions indicate that they generally understand that inflation pertains to rising prices, unemployment worsens during recessions, a dollar buys a lot in some countries, and that deficits are created when government spending exceeds tax revenues collected. Because of the exposure to various social and media outlets, students are generally acquainted with these ideas. It is therefore the instructor's role to reinforce their underlying enthusiasm to broaden and sharpen understanding of economic concepts.

The associated trepidation to economics, however, cannot be ignored, and it mainly comes from microeconomics. All too often, students tend to regard the "micro side" as abstract and theoretical, wanting in applicable experiences to the

extent that it can potentially lead to “debilitating test anxieties” (Chowdhury and Mallik, 2012; Kader, 2016). Introductory microeconomics appears to them as algebra in disguise and all about unrealistic model building. Such misgivings presumably come from a lack of exposure to the jargon in everyday conversations. For example, while it may not be surprising to hear people lamenting about the pernicious effects of unemployment during a dinner conversation, it is uncommon to find someone discussing the notion of the price elasticity of demand for cigarettes, even somewhat informally.

In addition, introductory courses in microeconomics and macroeconomics inescapably discuss concepts and principles using high school mathematics and notions of algebra. Albeit rudimentary, the algebra is purposefully useful for motivating the idea that economics is a scientific discipline, explaining the underlying theoretical background, and enhancing the expected learning proficiencies. These proficiencies include the cognitive application and creation of knowledge and the proper interpretation and manipulation of economic data (Hansen, 2001). As such, to help achieve economic literacy, standard textbooks in economics will often devote appendices that review high school math essentials. For instance, Acemoglu et al (2015) introduces the calculation of the slope to distinguish causality from correlation. To motivate the microeconomic idea of equilibrium price in demand and supply analysis, Karlan and Murdoch (2014) explain the use of linear equations to solve for equilibrium. Finally, Mankiw (2015) reinforces the use of ordered pairs to create graphs in the coordinate system; this is particularly useful when examining the macroeconomic relationship between inflation and unemployment. Hence, when such fundamental economic concepts are formally introduced in the classroom, coupled with the associated algebra and graphs, the uninitiated student invariably feels inundated with abstruse information and unfamiliar language. The result is a frustrated and demotivated student. Moreover, competence in “thinking like an economist” - the ability to analyze economic phenomena becomes a hurdle due to the math anxiety (Chang and Beilock, 2016).

The purpose of this research note is to provide salience to the use of personal anecdotes as a pedagogical device to motivate student learning and reinforce conceptual understanding. Personal anecdotes are essentially narrations of one’s life experiences, ranging from the individual, family, and to even seemingly mundane day-to-day life situations. In the context of teaching economics, an instructor shares his or her personal anecdotes to convey an idea or insight in a more memorable, vivid, and succinct way. As pointed out by Elzinga (2001), for classroom teaching of economics, “good lectures need stories.”

Personal anecdotes allow the instructor to (i) create a bond or connection with students and (ii) enrich the relatability of economic concepts to everyday situations in that life experiences bring attention to introspection - how an individual interprets events and responds to situations (McAdams, 2008; Mcnett, 2016). In general, when instructors share with students their very own interaction with the economic concepts taught in class, those seemingly abstruse

and abstract ideas become humanized. Recognizing the connection between textbook theory and actual practice, students, as a consequence, tend to share as well their personal experiences, facilitating an interactive classroom discussion. The paper concludes by offering some guidelines and caveats for the appropriate use of personal anecdotes.

Rationale

The crucial goal of economic education is to train students and produce college graduates with the ability to “think like an economist,” analyzing data and interpreting events using the lens of economics (Mankiw, 2015). All too often, however, the analysis and interpretation become intertwined with intricate abstractions, theory, and model building that students lose the ability to place fundamental economic concepts in the context of their day-to-day, personal life experiences. As pointed out by Hansen, Salemi, and Siegfried (2002), to wit: “what matters is how well students can apply their learning not only now but later, long after they complete their schooling.” Viewing economics in the context of life experiences is an important lifelong skill and civic duty as economics invariably permeates public policy. Hence, curricular literacy and the motivation to learn economics are of paramount concern.

Pedagogical research in student motivation and attitudes toward learning can be couched in terms of the instructor explaining the relevance of the subject matter in an interactive and engaging manner (Lin-Siegler, 2016). Various avenues are offered; it ranges from providing more illustrative examples to changing the pace and organization of the lectures. Timely feedback and collaborative group discussions are also seen as important (Webb and Gibson, 2015). Estep and Roberts (2015) emphasize the importance of building rapport with students. The overarching message is that a positive classroom environment creates the psychological dynamics of students not only motivated to learn but also, importantly, engaged with their instructor. It is in this premise that personal anecdotes can be used as a tool for motivating and reinforcing student learning. Personal anecdotes facilitate a classroom environment in which students recognize the connection between the economic concepts they read from the textbook and actual, real-world experiences they themselves experience. As such, they become positively receptive to the course objectives.

A personal anecdote is a short narrative about an event or situation that is often meant to illustrate, more vividly and concisely, one’s life experience. It can serve as a metaphor to one’s philosophy or general approach to life. It can elicit laughter, break the ice, and diminish the monotony of the conversation. When employed purposefully, it can create a personal relationship with the intended audience; Paolini (2015) highlights that the sharing of personal anecdotes leads to more positive student outcomes. In a classroom setting, personal anecdotes can be used to introduce a learning objective, motivate a concept, and emphasize case studies.

To pique student interest and set the stage for learning, personal anecdotes can be introduced on the first day of class. In addition to the customary enumeration

of classroom policies and course requirements, a personal anecdote about one's college experience with introductory economics sets the stage for a comfortable and inviting interaction between the students and instructor. Personal anecdotes, in this regard, are most effective and gain realism when an instructor recounts the feeling of excitement and discovery learning for the first time how firms use marginal analysis to raise profitability. More pointedly, an instructor can also narrate anecdotes about the trepidation experienced getting accustomed to the use of graphs and algebra in economics; it is filled with mistakes and learning from the mistakes. Lin-Siegler (2016), for instance, find that narrating to students stories which illuminate the struggles faced by eminent scientists lead to improved student outcomes and rectify misapprehensions. In addition, Solis and Turner (2016) report that instructors who engage in storytelling, narrating personal stories relatable to the course material are rated highly in teaching effectiveness.

Students are particularly receptive to these narratives. Sharing anecdotes about individual excitement creates the positive impression that students will learn something useful, practical, and applicable in the course. That is, sharing anecdotes about personal apprehensions faced in college humanizes the instructor's persona, reinforces favorable first-day impressions, and mitigates preconceived negative stereotypes. With the introduction of the use of personal anecdotes implemented on the first day, sharing further narratives about life experiences with economics can then be incorporated into subsequent lectures and discussions.

Motivating Examples

Textbooks in introductory economics are filled with what has become the standard suite of pedagogical aids, such as chapter summaries and learning objectives, color-coordinated graphs, problem-solving and applications-based questions, and a multitude of examples and case studies. With each new edition, chapters or sections are deleted, reorganized, or reworded to make the discussion more accessible to students. Mankiw (2015) and Parkin (2014) are but a few of the representative textbooks in introductory economics in which the examples and case studies chosen are useful for creating relevance of the course material. However, the examples and scenarios can be somewhat generic and limiting, not providing specific context for the students to relate with their experiences and their instructor's experiences. In this case, personal anecdotes can be used to provide students more insightful, context-driven examples. The presentation of fictional and literary material such as movies and short stories can convey applicable economic information (Ruder, 2010). However, sharing personal anecdotes can explicitly make the connection between classroom discussions and actual experiences. Narrating one's life experiences can help achieve the desired course objective in a more memorable and relatable way.

Principles of Microeconomics

Consider, for instance, the textbook treatment of the price elasticity of demand. The prototypical "necessities versus luxuries" classification of goods is a key determinant which makes demand more elastic or less elastic (Mankiw, 2015;

Parkin, 2014). A personal anecdote can reinforce the distinction and make it more memorable to a student. The instructor can share with students, for example, the narrative of growing up with a cultural and family background of being a “rice person.” That is, students fondly learn that their instructor views rice as a staple food and eats rice for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Moreover, the instructor can recount to students, as a mnemonic device, that “I need rice to survive” and “I can’t live if living is without rice,” the latter borrowed as a similitude from a classic song. This easily breaks the formality and monotony of class lectures. The anecdote acts as a platform for asking students to provide their very own examples of consumption patterns, identifying goods and services that tend to have an elastic or inelastic demand.

Importantly, students can recall a more memorable and enriching interpretation of the price elasticity of demand, with an accessible glimpse of the instructor’s cultural heritage. Also, there is a transformation of student perception to the course, with the realization that a somewhat abstract concept actually has a direct, human side. In general, the trepidation and misconceptions attached to the study of microeconomics can be eased and placed into a positive perspective with the use of a relevant personal anecdote. Moreover, as this specific example shows, the narrative can be an unobtrusive, yet insightful way of acknowledging cultural diversity and heritage. Colleges and universities are continually developing curricula that embraces cultural and global experiences to promote learning, and the use of even the simplest of personal anecdotes can serve as a framework for acknowledging cultural richness and diversity (Bowman and Park, 2015).

Principles of Macroeconomics

Personal anecdotes can also be used to reinforce excitement and curiosity to macroeconomic ideas. Textbooks conventionally provide a myriad of facts and figures for calculating unemployment and examining its trend. These include unemployment rates during recessions (Acemoglu et al, 2015) and the labor force participation of men and women over time (Mankiw, 2015). However, pedagogical instruction can be strengthened by bringing attention to the social ills and personal hardships of unemployment. That is, in addition to simply providing a straightforward empirical account of the national and local problems of unemployment, one can also share an anecdote of a personal or family experience with unemployment.

Sharing the travails of losing a job and source of income creates a relatable life story to the students. The introduction of a personal anecdote stimulates interest and creates an open, relaxed atmosphere, which provides students themselves the opportunity to share their very own personal anecdotes. These could range from a family member losing a job after several years with the company for lack of higher education to the bureaucracy of obtaining unemployment insurance. The ensuing result is a classroom discussion that puts into greater context the social and institutional problems of unemployment. As traditional lectures are often viewed as a form of passive learning (Allgood, Walstad, and Siegfried,

2015), a narration of actual life experiences reinforces life-long learning in economics. It helps transform class discussion from passive to active learning.

Guidelines and Caveats

From the perspective of an instructor, personal anecdotes provide a platform for creating contextual relatability, student participation, and classroom discussions. From the perspective of a student, the narratives instructors share offer a glimpse of their character and insights to their life experiences. It is this connection or bridge to the human persona that appeals to students, reinforcing positive expectations about the learning environment (Abrahamson, 2011). This section offers some guidelines and caveats that instructors need to take into account to create a more meaningful and engaging narration of personal anecdotes in the classroom.

Narrate with a Purpose

Foremost, to be effective, a personal anecdote must be aligned with a specific learning objective (Solis and Turner, 2016). Hence, no matter how interesting or amusing an episode of one's life story might appear to be, the instructor's main goal is to convey the essence of an economic concept. An anecdote that does not have any pedagogical content integrated into a specific learning objective will dilute its relevance.

Plan and Rehearse

A well-planned and well-rehearsed personal anecdote facilitates purposeful implementation of the intended learning objective. The way a person typically narrates life experiences to friends and family is markedly different from the way an instructor would do it with his or her students. As such, instructors must plan to select appropriate episodes in their lives to share with students. Timing and delivery are equally important, and so adequate time must be devoted to rehearse. A hastily and poorly exemplified anecdote will appear vacuous of pedagogy. Spontaneous narrations can lead to a rambling monologue of tangential information, which students will find distracting.

Keep it Simple

A personal anecdote should be short and simple. Adding several layers of information, intricate plots, and embellishments to the narration, while amusing, can overpower the specific course objective planned and rehearsed for students to learn. The anecdotes are meant to create a teachable moment and not to disengage students from the underlying economic concept. When it comes to anecdotes, simplicity is beauty and less is more.

Do Not Overdo it

It is not essential to have several personal anecdotes to every class discussion and learning objective, otherwise students will quickly have diminishing excitement and diminishing returns in learning. The personal life experiences will appear stale and contrived. Personal anecdotes are meant to supplement and not unilaterally replace other pedagogical techniques and classroom activities.

Create a Sense of Belonging

As the example narration on rice as a staple food vis-à-vis the price elasticity of demand demonstrates, sharing one's cultural heritage and family background with students, whenever appropriately possible, can be used as a paradigm for acknowledging diversity. Student motivation is also dependent on a sense of belongingness, which textbook examples and case studies in economics cannot adequately provide. Bringing into perspective one's cultural identity and heritage validate the existence of individual differences, the diversity of cultural practices, and the richness of the collegiate body (Paolini, 2015).

Conclusion

Fundamentally, instructors are always looking for ways to make a more meaningful, insightful, and interactive classroom environment. Personal anecdotes can be used as a pedagogical device to help achieve this purpose. A personal anecdote is about sharing life experiences instructors encounter that are relatable to the economic concepts being taught in class. To the uninitiated student, learning economic concepts and textbook examples for the first time can appear daunting and demotivating. Through the lens of personal episodes in one's life, the seemingly abstract and challenging economic concepts become easier for students to understand. All in all, student anxieties are tempered, motivation and retention enhanced, and a positive learning environment reinforced.

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