

Teaching in Ethiopia

This is a posting on teaching here in Ethiopia. After some initial confusion (I had written to the new chair in advance about a proposed course that apparently was not received, or I did not receive a reply), I agreed to teach a course on natural resource economics at the graduate master's program in the faculty of economics.

Although I had brought some teaching materials that included some on energy and the environment, what I had prepared as a graduate course for the Montclair Ph.D. program in Environmental Management would work only partly for the natural resources course. At any rate, I began teaching the five students, shown below in the first picture, on March 9, following a Middle States team visit to the American University in Beirut at the beginning of the month.

We managed to have a few sessions before I set off to the suburban Addis campus of Akaki to teach in a Ph.D. program in law - namely, a course in political economy. (I am writing this from Akaki and will return to Addis next week to resume the natural resources course).

The two courses could not be more different, even though the number of students is comparable (there are 8 students in the political economy course, shown below in the second picture). Students in the natural resources course are largely used to a lecture format in which a professor either puts on a blackboard all of the teaching notes, or in a recent innovation, puts them in a PowerPoint format and has them duplicated for students to essentially memorize and regurgitate on an exam. This is completely alien to how I have taught over the years. However, the students were so upset with my seminar approach for a small class that I have wound up making PowerPoint notes compromise to help them along. In so doing, however, I have sprinkled the PowerPoint notes with separately distributed classroom case studies in which I am focusing on their ability to reason critically over the uses and limits of what is essentially a theoretical course.

The current chair kindly lent me his own PowerPoint files which I have used in preparing my own. His approach has been purely theoretical, focusing on dynamic optimization models in which the essentially purely mathematical derivations of Hamiltonian functions are used to derive the necessary and sufficient conditions for an optimum. Not once is there any reference to real world data, and not once is there any reference whatsoever to Ethiopia. I was impressed by the rigor of the formulations but left puzzled as to the absence of any applications.

For my own approach, I am emphasizing spreadsheet formulations in which tractable solutions of the pricing and production time paths can be readily derived for dynamic optimization problems, and from which an assessment is made with regard to the efficiency of market prices to derive an optimal solution. I also am using pdf files from the IPCC Stern Report on global warming and climate change as a policy document from which they can see to what extent economic analysis can be brought to bear on some difficult questions involving environmental science and public policy. We'll see to what extent that this approach bears fruit in terms of their ability to analyze critically largely theoretical techniques with some of the more real problems around them, e.g. global warming, environmental degradation-maintenance-conservation, and the like.

What I have decided to do in making the PowerPoint compromise is to insist on a basically seminar style for the five students in the class - otherwise the absurdity of my pure lecturing with PowerPoint slides would stretch the boundaries of rational discourse. For the natural resources course, students will have a mid-term and final, and submit a research paper. I have decided not to accept any purely theoretical expositions and to insist that they do something applied that shows the extent to which economic theory can be applied usefully to natural resource decisions in general, and to Ethiopia in particular.

The second course is quite different. Students include law professors and two sitting judges. They are used to a seminar style and seem quite comfortable with the approach I am taking, namely, an introduction to the range and scope of political economy, and more particularly, how political economy relates to the scope of law. Students have no exams in this course but do have to write a research paper. Preliminary topics show they are beginning to grasp the relevance of economics to the law, and they will have until May 1 to submit a completed version of their papers.

In general, students here are quite capable, as capable as any I have ever taught anywhere. My sense is that what is needed at the graduate level, at least in economics, is not just theoretical rigor, but how economics can be applied to the policy context of decision-making in the country. So far I am disappointed to see such a dis-connection between what students are required to learn in economics and the practice of economic policy in the country. It is as though the University operates in a total vacuum. In fact, to my knowledge, public policy questions regarding fiscal and monetary policy largely unfold within the context of routine IMF and World Bank missions in which Ethiopian counterparts are few and far between, the result of which is largely an externally driven set of policies that may or may not reflect the economic, social and political realities on the ground.

It seems to me that there is a strong need to look to university partnerships beyond the campus, including closer ties that provide internship opportunities for students in various agencies so that they can get a closer understanding of the process of policy formulation and implementation. Toward this end, I recently met with Samia Zakaria Gutu, a former graduate student in economics from Texas Tech University, whom I had met years ago in conjunction with a summer training program. She completed a master's degree in economics and returned to Ethiopia where she soon joined the Central Statistical Agency and where she has worked ever since. While at Texas Tech, she wrote a thesis on price discrimination in coffee, with applications to Ethiopia - exactly the sort of policy-oriented type of research that I think students should be doing now.

Samia is now director of Ethiopia's Central Statistical Agency, with major responsibilities such as Ethiopia's periodic censuses, and the like. During our conversation, I asked her if she ever spoke with students at the University on the work of the Central Statistical Agency. She said that this seems not to be part of Ethiopia's public academic culture, i.e., she has never been invited, even though she would be willing to do so were this the case. When I pointed out this contact to students, I emphasized not only the practical value of access to timely statistics on which theses could be written, but also prospective employment possibilities beyond the university. They seemed almost dazed that I should pursue this question.

Part of the daze is that many of the students in the graduate program have signed an obligation to serve as instructors for a two-year period following receipt of their degrees. They receive fellowships in exchange during their studies. And so many of them see a time horizon bound by a post-graduation teaching cycle after which they either will be retained in some minor teaching post or go elsewhere for employment, all of which seems terribly limited in scope to me.

There now is a proposal to launch a PhD program in economics. I have been asked to write an evaluation of the proposal, which I will do this spring. Overall, it is logical to have such a program. What I plan to do first is meet with the authoring faculty to discuss the mix of theoretical and practical emphasis. Based on what I have seen so far, I am a bit skeptical that the program will do much more than serve the needs of teaching economics faculty for the many campuses now expanding throughout the country, but for whom any emphasis on applied economics may be nearly totally lacking, and which may simply perpetuate the isolation of academic economists from many of the real world issues that confront Ethiopia.

Much of my bias stems not just from the applied work I have done at Montclair. It also stems from my previous Fulbright at the University of Dakar, in which students in the graduate program had a much stronger emphasis on applications rather than pure theory. Clearly, there is an *optimum optimorum* out there, and it may yet work out that the PhD program can provide a judicious mix of theory and applications that will serve the needs of future teaching faculty but also the public policy community in Ethiopia.

Well, enough on teaching. It is truly gratifying to teach eager students who grasp quickly what economics I am providing in the classroom. That alone compensates for almost all of any of the above shortcomings I have mentioned.



Graduate students in the natural resources economics course, 2009



Graduate students in the political economy course of the Ph.D. in law program, 2009

