

Looking Back at a Teaching Career

By John Kuhlman

This is the first time that I have made the letters and notes I have received from former students public. From them, the reader will get a view of my role as a professor of economics and, more importantly, as a teacher of economics in the words of the students.

When I was younger, my mother always assumed that I would go to college, and she frequently reminded me, “You have to amount to something.”

I enrolled in Washington State College a couple of months before Pearl Harbor, and my student performance was mediocre. The only course that excited me was an introduction to economics. In October 1942, I enlisted and was called to active duty in March 1943.

I spent three years in the army, but my contribution to the war effort was **de minimus**. On the other hand, it was the greatest educational experience of my life. It was the first time I had been more than 50 miles from home, so I experienced different people as well as different social environments. It was a very broadening experience — an invaluable part of becoming a classroom teacher. I began to see the value of education, and my mother’s hope that I would amount to something began to take shape.

I returned to college on the GI Bill and decided to major in economics. The subject appealed to me because it was about reasoning rather than memorizing, and it was going to be relevant in post-war America.

I found heroes among the faculty. I could see their minds at work. I could see how they lived. They were accessible to students and seemed to enjoy being with them in the classroom and on the campus. I wanted to be a college teacher, and I wanted to be a hero to my students.

I decided that I wanted to study with Professor Edwin E. Witte at the University of Wisconsin–Madison to specialize in the role of the government in the economy. Professor Witte was one of the last Wisconsin institutionalists and had an unshakable belief that we could solve the country’s problems.

I taught at the University of Richmond and the University of Cincinnati before coming to the University of Missouri in 1961. All of the classes I taught during this period were discussion classes and were

not confined to a narrow discussion of economic principles. In 1963, I took over the introductory course, Economics 51, which had 500 students in each lecture. Before setting foot in the classroom, I set about establishing a character for myself consisting of brightly colored vests and matching socks. Some students thought they could predict my mood by the color of the vests. I wore this attire until I moved to the honors section, Econ 51Gh, in 1975, with 66 students. In total, I probably had 24,000 students take these two courses.

I had a clearly formulated goal in teaching elementary economics: I wanted to teach students how to think or, at least, encourage them to think.

For example, when the Republicans were pushing an amendment to the Constitution requiring a balanced budget, I asked who thought the national debt was too big? Of course, nearly every hand in the auditorium went up. Then I told them to write down what they thought the debt was. Of course many of them didn't know the magnitude of the debt, and I asked, "How do you know that it is too big if you don't know the size of it?" I told them that I wasn't interested in what their fathers thought; I wanted to know what they thought.

During the last lecture of the semester, I often explained my strategy, and many students agreed that I had "rattled their cage." I also continued the practice of not just teaching economics as a purely technical exercise but also to reach out to the students and demonstrate the lifestyle of an educated person, including how such a person thinks. I think I accomplished that.

The rest of this piece consists of notes and letters relating to those goals.

Early in my teaching career, when I started receiving notes, letters and cards, I kept them in a folder. These letters include students in both the large and the honors sections.

"One leaves Econ 51 either loving it or hating all things economic. Mediocrity has never been a part of this class. In large part, I think, this is due to the teacher. Never on this campus have I met such a dynamic, energetic, concerned, interested, and interesting person as Dr. Kuhlman. This course involves a lot of work — it never stops. But this is one course where you get out exactly as much, and no more, as you put in. True, the quizzes were blackmail, but I also agree that there is no other way that students will keep up. And I think that this showed again that Kuhlman is interested in us, in having us learn. Economics to be understood has to be lived. (And, God, do I feel like I lived with the Program Learner for 15 weeks)." (Unsigned)

“I won’t thank you for the ‘A’ because I think I earned that, but I will thank you for giving me the spirit and motivation that I didn’t think a big university could provide me. It’s been an experience.” (Erwin)

A few semesters I composed a letter that was sent to all of the students in the large classes who received a grade of A. There were quite a few responses including some from parents.

“Thank you for your kind letter regarding my grade in Econ 51. I would like you to know that I learned more from your course than from any other I’ve taken, probably because of your efforts at making us teach ourselves. The quizzes were definitely an asset in that respect.” (Malaine, 1974)

“Some time ago my son completed a course that you taught in economics. He repeatedly talked about how much he enjoyed your course, in spite of the fact that large numbers of students were enrolled. It was indeed a pleasure for me to know that he earned five hours of A in your course. Another pleasant result of your teaching was the letter that was forwarded to him congratulating him upon completing the course with an ‘A’ level of achievement. Such time-consuming and personal expressions by you mean much to students.” (Lynn, 1974)

“It is with sincere pleasure that I respond to your congratulatory letter of June 1. In four years at the university, it is a unique experience to be personally commended in this (or any other fashion.) *** It is indeed refreshing to be reminded that in the middle of structure and bureaucracy there are a few remaining humans. You have flattered me.” (Jack)

“I really appreciated your extra-academic concern for your students (what they were, where they were going, and what they might become). I thoroughly enjoyed the informal discussion you took time to organize in your home (and your wife’s lasagna was fantastic).” (Melvin, 1973)

I always appreciated notes from administrators who were close to the faculty, students, and the classroom. I felt that responses of those who were more removed from all three were more perfunctory. Ted Tarkow, who is an associate dean, was a staunch supporter of my teaching effort.

“I am delighted to be able to report to you that Economics 51-GH for the winter, 1982 semester is completely closed. Moreover, the course closed the second day of pre-registration. I offer you heartiest congratulations, and thanks for such a fine contribution to Honors education on this campus.”

“I have just had the opportunity to read through the course evaluations which you submitted in connection with your fall 50GH course, The Economics of Utopian Literature. It is impossible to imagine a more splendid set of student evaluations, and you have every reason to feel a great deal of pride in the quality of teaching which your students believe you offered in the course.” (Ted Tarkow, director of the Honors College, 1980)

In some of my smaller classes students were required to write Gee-Whiz papers—one page, double space, and three paragraphs. The first paragraph described an interesting economic problem that the student had found. The second paragraph was an analysis of the problem, and the third paragraph was recommendation as to what should be done about it. The paper was to be delivered to my office at which time we would discuss the paper.

“I remember little of the contents of your course. What I remember is your love of learning, your openness to ideas and creativity, and your sense of the moral dimension to the endeavor of study. I recall very clearly something you said on your first day in class. You told our small honors section that you took attendance and that you expected us all to be in class every day. Your reason for the expectation was unique and memorable: ‘UMC is a state school. Part of the cost of you being here is being paid by taxes from people all around the state, many of whom will never go to college and might not be able to send their kids to college. You owe it to them to be serious about your studies.’ That statement and the moral sense that it conveyed, made a significant impact on me, as did your later interest in my progress at UMC.” (Tim)

Tim was one of the best students I ever had. He graduated from Harvard Law School and was the Governor of Virginia from 2006 to 2010. He is now the Democratic National Committee Chairman. His original intent was to major in journalism at MU, but he took my course as a freshman and changed his major to economics.

The following are excerpts from letters to the editor in the alumni magazine, *Mizzou*. All were written in 2008, so the date by their name is the year of their graduation.

“Why is it that so many Mizzou students remember your teaching with such clarity? I am among them. It may have been fear because the material was so unfamiliar to a literature-and history-mad girl. What was your secret for making so many disparate types of students work so hard in your class?” (Peggy, 1973)

“I was one of those whining journalism students who was required to attend your Econ 51 class — and ended up loving it! Your lectures stand out as a highlight of my time at Mizzou. (I can’t say the same for your weekly quizzes, but I respect your devious brilliance for requiring them.)” (Gayle, 1977)

“I learned in your classes, partly because of your skill as a speaker and teacher, partly because of your depth of knowledge and breadth of intellect, but mostly because it was not just dry information and knowledge. It truly mattered — obviously to you, and therefore to us students. We were ‘infected’ by your passion.” (David, 1973)

“Although I am an unabashed chauvinist for the discipline of history, I consistently tell my advisees that the single most valuable course I took as an undergraduate was introduction to economics. Thanks so much for an insightful and truly illuminate course.” (Jon, 1969)

“When my teenagers encountered trouble in a subject, I always advised them to try their hardest and not to be afraid of their teachers and used you as an example of someone who was accessible. I told them that even in your large lecture class, I always felt that you knew that I was there.”

So I close with another quote from a former student who, in turn quoted me.

“John M. Kuhlman, economics professor at the University of Missouri for many years knew what it took to nourish the life of the soul: Kuhlman wrote: ‘Intellectual capacity is useful for more than simply solving problems. The richness of one’s life also depends on the development of that intellectual capacity. A person who reads little, who thinks little, and who acts little cannot have a very fulfilling life. The college undergraduate just cannot

predict what situations he or she will find himself in over the span of his life. He may be selling shoes or digging ditches, but the richness of his life need not depend on his daily vocational activities. The ability to enjoy subtle humor, the capacity to initiate and carry on a conversation with a stranger, the talent to enjoy a musical performance or a play—these and many other activities depend on the development of one’s intellectual capacity. A dull and barren mind will lead to a dull and barren life. A lively and fertile mind at least makes it possible for the individual to enjoy a stimulating and challenging existence. And with all the wealth at the command of present-day society, it would seem to be a major crime that so many have no vision for a full and complete life.”

There you have two views—some of the things that the professor did in his classroom and the views of the students and their reactions to the professor and the classroom experience. I am not able to fully explain the reaction to my teaching. It takes a lot of effort to be a good teacher. I don’t know whether one is born to be a good teacher or whether one can learn to be a good teacher. Maybe some of both. I hope you have enjoyed this article. If you have questions or comments, my e-mail address is: econ51gh@charter.net