

Back to School!

by Lindy Davies

The first lesson in a *Progress & Poverty* course is a touchy thing. Of course, the initial meeting of any class is important for the establishment of authority, rapport and rhythm. Every teacher must do these things distinctively. Some go in with regal bearing and indisputable dignity; others tend to, y'know, hang out — no matter, as long as you establish authority. That is Job #1. You must carefully pick your way between the disciplinarian rock and the hard place of unregulated gabbing.

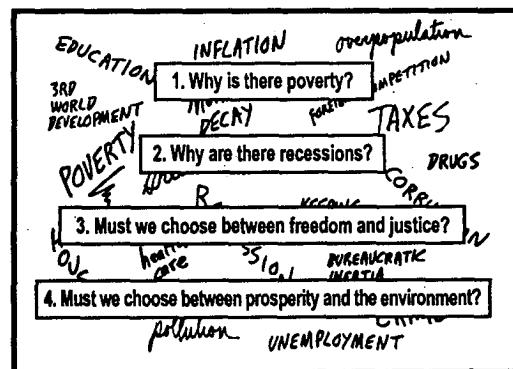
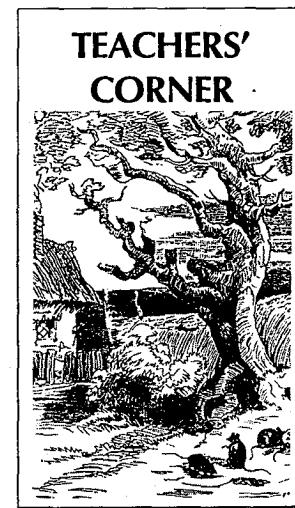
Remember that teaching is a performance event. The members of your class really do consider themselves to be of a lower rank than you. Disputatious as they might get, students come into your classroom to receive your instruction. They generally do not want too much autonomy — especially at first. This means that as the teacher, authority is yours to lose. If you can demonstrate clear knowledge of who you are, what you're teaching, and how to relate to the administrative functions outside your fiery crucible of knowledge, then most students will happily pay attention to what you have to say.

The teacher of *P & P* has two additional challenges. First, one has to find some way to get people to come back for the next lesson. And, we have to deftly field that sharp question that's on most minds: "What's the catch? Is this some kind of cult or something?"

"Political economy deals with various and complicated phenomena," wrote Henry George, "yet they are phenomena which may be resolved into simple elements, and which are but the manifestations of familiar principles." This is not a partisan statement, but rather a very reassuring one, indicating that a meaningful understanding of economic issues can be had without the benefit of advanced training. What we can offer our students, apart from any specific reform proposal, is "a free course that sheds light on today's baffling problems." If they think they really can get that here, then they'll come back!

The first lesson is a good time to focus on those problems. One way to do that is to list them. Ask the class to name all the economic problems they can think of. The teacher will then write them up on the board, in (apparently) no particular order. Things will seem to be getting more and more confusing for the poor students, and "This," you say to your skeptical class, "is a fairly accurate picture of what most people think of when they hear the word 'economics'." You won't get much disagreement on that point!

You seemed to be writing that list of problems up on the board impulsively, helter-skelter — but there was method in your madness. You have placed certain "right-wing" issues like taxes, crime, "big government," etc. on one side of the board, opposing "left-wing" issues such as poverty, housing and education on the other. In general, you have opposed opposing issues (like inflation and unemployment — or population and environmental destruction)



in such a way as to highlight the ostensibly intractable contradictions of economic policy. Noting these connections, you can then lead a discussion in which the class draws connections and comes up with a list of basic questions that a course in political economy must deal with. For added visual effect, those questions can be recorded right over top of the mish-mash you've already generated: order emerges (potentially, at least) from chaos!