

## **Do Great Economists Make Great Teachers? – George Stigler as a Dissertation Supervisor\***

President Reagan fared much better than the student who came to George complaining that he didn't deserve the "F" he'd received in George's course. George agreed but explained that "F" was the lowest grade the administration allowed him to give (Friedland 1993:782).

In the eleven years that George Stigler labored at Columbia University he had exactly one dissertation student<sup>1</sup>. That number did not radically increase during his subsequent first eleven years at Chicago, though it did in fact at least double<sup>2</sup>. Stigler was an economist of great ability, skill and influence, arguably one of the best economic minds of his age. (This is a rather remarkable statement given compeers like Friedman and Samuelson.) Though he clearly thought teaching to be a lesser activity, an adjunct to research, George Stigler took his teaching very seriously (as he did all activities associated with his professional life). His influence on his colleagues in particular and the profession in general is unmistakable. Friends and foes alike (there were few, if any, who knowing George Stigler didn't fall into one or the other category) conceded his ability to persuade whether in written or verbal form. The puzzle then is why such a formidable figure who contributed so much to economics, wasn't sought out more as a dissertation advisor by the many graduate students passing through the economics department in Chicago? The answer reveals not only something about George Stigler himself (which might then remain on the purely idiosyncratic level), but also about graduate education in economics and more specifically about student supervision.

### **Good Teacher/Good Researcher**

One way to simply dismiss this question is to conclude that the parallel between communicating to one's peers and to one's students is simply spurious. In a field where the division of labor (returns to specialization) is the benchmark, there is simply no reason why the skills that make a good teacher (or supervisor) should be closely associated with those which set apart the research

of an economist. It is true that communication and persuasion is needed in both cases, but again, the audience or market is different<sup>3</sup>.

Stigler himself did not accept this view. He could not imagine a good teacher of economics not being at the same time a competent and published researcher. Stigler distinctly believed that only good researchers were qualified to develop and sustain rigorous standards within the economics profession. On a surface level at least, this would seem to contradict his insistence on specialization, his stern condemnation of the generalist (see Stigler 1963a:10). Why shouldn't individuals specialize in teaching while others focus on research? Stigler could not accept this premise since he saw successful teaching as a joint product arising out of research and as such inseparable<sup>4</sup>.

He [the teacher] is to acquire knowledge and construct ideas-and keep them a secret. It is improbable scientifically: it asks a man to be competent in his understanding of work that he has had no part in constructing (Stigler 1963:14).

This of course doesn't argue for a symmetric flow of causality. All good teachers must under Stigler's dictum be good researchers. It doesn't necessarily follow that good researchers turn into good teachers. Nor, though Stigler states his argument with great assurance<sup>5</sup>, it is far from clear that his premise is relevant for undergraduate education (an area remote from Stigler's concerns for most of his career (see Stigler 1963b:80)). Graduate and undergraduate education, as they are both currently constituted, seem to have quite distinct objectives<sup>6</sup>. Graduate training "prepares them [the students] only to do abstract research within a framework that only a few fellow graduates can understand." (Colander and Brenner 1992: 6-7) To the extent that Stigler is accurate in terms of effective teaching, his logic is much more applicable to graduate teaching and especially to supervision.

Nor are there any signals, especially from research institutions, that teaching (particularly undergraduate teaching) is taken at all seriously. Until very recently, graduate students were left unexposed to teaching techniques<sup>7</sup>. Given time as a scarce resource, investing in teaching, to augment future income flows, would not bear up under any serious scrutiny<sup>8</sup>. No one ever taught Stigler (or most economists) how to teach. Instead, the training of an academic economist (especially in the major US departments) bears the closest resemblance to the sort of personal and professional relations characterizing medieval guilds. Education is in part a socialization process. You learn to do by imitating those professors that have gained the most success in the discipline and/or those you most admire. When time comes to pick up the chalk and begin, you revert to memories (and class notes) of your own instructional experience<sup>9</sup>. This perpetuates a tradition of ‘chalk and talk’ that still continues as a substitute for what educational theorists might think of as effective teaching. The simplest option has always been to replicate the past whenever possible<sup>10</sup>.

Such arguments however fail to get to the heart of graduate teaching, especially an economist’s role as mentor and supervisor. The question of whether good economists can be bad teachers is not one that can be resolved by simple empirical evidence involving numbers of PhD students, class enrollments or course evaluations. Measurement confusion reflects a supposition that each relevant market under examination is to a large degree homogenous. But the slightest reflection will reveal the demand for and supply of dissertation supervisors to be clearly heterogeneous. In an obvious way, the interests of the graduate students themselves will vary. Some may select a specific economic department in the hopes of working with a particular staff member. Others may be less sure of their aims. But these are not the differences I wish to emphasize. Though Stigler himself was loath to allow psychological constraints to enter into explanations, it is exactly those clearly psychological determinants that shed the most light on this issue<sup>11</sup>.

## **Protestant Fathers/Renegade Students**

As previously mentioned, supervision harks back more to the medieval guilds than to simple markets of exchange. It is as much an issue of human relationships as of intellectual problem solving. The ability to bring a dissertation topic to fruition has to be constrained by the largely implacable barrier of personality. For most students, Stigler did not appear to be a sympathetic figure. A man who even his own colleagues found to be formidable would have little appeal for most graduate students. To an extent, this was due to Stigler's idiosyncratic approach to people. More than is perhaps appropriate, he treated students and especially those he supervised as equals. This meant that his standards were as demanding of these apprentice wannabees as they were for the journeymen and masters of the discipline. For most professional economists, being on the receiving end of George Stigler's caustic wit was not unlike an immersion in an acid bath. Remarkably, the pH level of the bath remained largely unchanged for students, especially at the graduate level. His standards for analytical reasoning did not adjust for experience or ability. He refused to suffer fools gladly, no matter what their stature<sup>12</sup>.

This did not make him a poor supervisor, unless the definition of a good performer is tied to generating the greatest utility for the greatest number of students. True, making Stigler the benchmark for all graduate education would greatly decrease the numbers of newly minted PhDs (though it might raise the quality). But no one is suggesting Stigler as representing any sort of aspirational benchmark in supervision. Instead, the very heterogeneity of the market could make him just the person to supervise a distinct minority of aspirants (and by no means those with the most negligible potential).

In my view, the good teacher is not distinguished by the breadth of his knowledge, by the lucidity of his exposition, or by the immediate reactions of his student. His fundamental task is not to dispense information, for in this role he is incomparably inferior to the written word. His task is to fan the spark of genuine intellectual curiosity and to instill the conscience of a scholar-to communicate the

enormous adventure and the knightly conduct in the quest for knowledge. (I realize that this view of the teacher's function will strike many as austere. They will emphasize the need for sympathetic development of the utmost in each individual, and turn teaching into coaching. I think they do a disservice to mediocre as well as to good minds.) (Stigler 1963:14)

Stigler in this quote is quite clearly describing his own, much admired teacher, Frank Knight<sup>13</sup>. Despite subsequent differences with Knight on economic matters, he clearly remained Stigler's idol through out all his life. As Blaug puts it, he remained in awe of the man (in much the same way that despite his differences, Blaug remained nervous and in awe of Stigler). It seems clear that to a certain degree, Stigler did model himself in the classroom after Frank Knight, adding however an unfortunate element that bespoke more of Jacob Viner than of anyone else. Stigler himself relates the way in which during one of his own graduate courses, Viner mentally flattened a fellow student (see Stigler 1988:20).

Today's fashionable notions of teacher-student relations present a warmer, almost cuddly, picture. This was not Stigler's vision.

"When I was a student," he said, "I never threw my arms around Jacob Viner. He would have killed me if I tried!"

I know of no student who wanted to throw his arms around George Stigler but I am sure the consequences would have been equally dire (Sowell 1993: 792).<sup>14</sup>

Most students would have found the cost of working with Stigler to be prohibitive. In a sense, like Frank Knight, he expected his students to write something meaningful. For the average PhD student, the dissertation period is sufficiently traumatic under the best of circumstances. The temptation to substitute a more congenial, and ready at hand, alternative<sup>15</sup> can dominate even the most noble of intentions. It is the successful completion of a dissertation that garners rewards rather than an ambitious project that fails to reach full fruition.

He was non-directive in an era where you had very powerful people like Milton Friedman and Al Harberger who were the opposite. In the case of Friedman, this was the era of the money demand function. And if you were a graduate student in money, you did a demand for money study. Greg Lewis, in labour economics, very closely supervised, in painstaking detail, the research of his students. Al Harberger did the same thing at that time. It was investment and durables. George was not like that at all (Conversation with Sam Peltzman October 1997).

However, given the heterogeneous nature of graduate students already noted, this low cost alternative would not necessarily be a high yield strategy for each and every student<sup>16</sup>.

Had my Chicago exposure been limited to the likes of Jacob Viner and Milton Friedman, both of whom were also my teachers there, I doubt that I should have ever emerged from the familiarly large ranks of Ph.D's with no or few publications. Jacob Viner, the classically erudite scholar whose self-appointed task in life seemed to be that of destroying confidence in students, and Milton Friedman, whose dominating intellectual brilliance in argument and analysis relegated the student to the role of fourth-best imitation – these were not the persons who encouraged students to believe that they too might eventually have ideas worthy of merit (Buchanan 1997:173-174).

If you look at three of his well-known students Mark Blaug, Sam Peltzman and Thomas Sowell, their common denominator is a clear sense of self-direction and self-confidence. They were all capable of standing up to Stigler, of giving as good as they got<sup>17</sup>. This was no different than the way in which he treated other academic economists. To gain his respect, you had to prove yourself capable of returning his serve (to hark back to Stigler's tennis playing days)<sup>18</sup>.

He slaughtered his students. Right at the beginning of our conversations together, I realized (I don't know whether I grasped this consciously) that you always had to give back as good as he gave (Conversation with Mark Blaug June 1998).

He was then the right supervisor for a very unusual group of students. The vast majority wisely stayed away. Moreover, he looked after those few students he did shepherd. He was instrumental in both Blaug and Sowell receiving Fellowship and Scholarship funds to see them through their degrees<sup>19</sup>.

### **Open Season on Ideas/ Open Season on Students**

As a graduate teacher, Stigler was not particularly effective in any conventional sense of the term. We could say of Stigler what he in fact said of Frank Knight. "Knight was both a great and an absurd teacher. The absurdity was documented by his utterly disorganized teaching, with

constant change of subject and yet insistent repetition of arguments.” (Stigler 1997:97)<sup>20</sup> Knight appealed to the more exceptional students, a Don Patinkin (see Patinkin 1973) or his brother-in-law Lester Telser, even though neither one ultimately worked under him. The average graduate student had quite a different experience<sup>21</sup>. Knight’s great gift to students was the instillation of a sceptical, irreverent approach to established theories. “The big job of economics is to divest people of prejudices-to have them see the questions as they are.” (Knight quoted in Patinkin 1973:791).

Stigler did continue this aspect of Knight’s tradition. “One lesson I learned, or possibly overlearned, was that of scepticism toward received beliefs and authoritative reputations. ... I suspect that we heard the word “nonsense” too often. I certainly came away believing that the popular acceptance of an idea was little support for its validity.” (Stigler 1988: 26-27). In subsequent years, Stigler’s Chicago course in Industrial Organization became an occasion to ridicule a particular, almost cherished set of his own Harvard Bete Noires (as well as others).

It was the perfect place for Stigler to conduct a Demolition Derby. Nor was he hesitant about the task. Theories like “monopolistic competition” and “countervailing power,” which were treated reverently at Harvard (where they originated), were eviscerated by Stigler (Sowell 1993:787).

While such an approach will amuse the best students (and confuse the rest), it is not clear that an unrestricted diet of Demolition Derbies builds strong minds or healthy economists. Demolition Derbies have no rules of engagement. You bash into an opponent, choosing the perceived weakest spot of his vehicle. (I am not in a position to know whether female drivers have in more recent times taken up the sport.) The last car standing wins. Victory goes not necessarily to the sturdiest car but to the driver best skilled at manoeuvring. When extended to economic teaching and discussion, it is far from clear what most students gain by watching a clever teacher eviscerate an opponent. They are often not in a position to dispute such cleverness. It is even less obvious how productive such an approach would be at an undergraduate level.

Stigler certainly never attempted to reach out to his students. This deliberate distance might produce only a limited number of consequences at the graduate level, but would more likely generate serious and unfavourable outcomes when applied to large undergraduate lectures. Such students are bound to have much wider ranges of ability and interest in the subject. At this level, a key characteristic becomes an ability to approach economics afresh from the vantage point of an average student with no prior background in economics. This is no mean feat for a consummate economist for whom economics has become an intuitive way of thinking. For most students, economics is painfully non-intuitive. But, Stigler saw no reason to compromise. He unequivocally spoke in the shorthand of his profession, refusing to make links obvious. Like his teachers before him, Stigler expected his own students to battle their way to his level<sup>22</sup>. To use a more modern term, he was distinctly ‘user unfriendly’. His own textbook is a clear example of this tendency. It is written not for the struggling student, but for someone who already understands (to some extent) price theory. It is written for the instructor rather than the student<sup>23</sup>.

This book (*The Theory of Price*) is probably the least readable thing Stigler ever wrote. It was not a matter of convoluted writing or confused thought ... but of excessive condensation that required painstakingly slow pondering over every concentrated thought. If the book had been three times as long, it could have been read in half the time (Sowell 1993:785).

Can one conclude anything about teaching using George Stigler as a case study? Those who most benefited from George Stigler were to a large degree self-selected. This is why he provides a less than optimal model for undergraduate teaching. Good, even great economists do not necessarily make successful teachers at this level<sup>24</sup>. In contrast, graduate work and particularly locating an appropriate supervisor is more like a search for a congenial marriage partner. There is no precise formula to describe the necessary chemistry or the correct approach to adopt. There are too many exceptions to provide sufficiently hard and fast rules. What George Stigler demonstrates is that no matter what the number of graduate students an academic attracts, a clear passion for the subject coupled with the quality of his or her own research abilities will over time produce the best results.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mark Blaug was the only graduate student with enough confidence to take on Stigler as his supervisor. They remained good friends and Stigler was consistently supportive of Blaug despite obvious political as well as methodological differences.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Peltzman completed a dissertation in the field of industrial organization, while Tom Sowell's work involved History of Thought. However, the Sowell/Stigler effort was more the result of a shotgun wedding than a willing partnership. George Stigler's opinion of Sowell's abilities remained critical throughout the remaining years.

<sup>3</sup> Whether economists are good communicators in any sense of the term is entirely another issue. But it is not an issue particularly germane to the problem at hand

<sup>4</sup> Certainly Stigler's insistence (1963a) that not only active research, but published research, is a necessary requirement for good teaching seems excessive. Aaron Director has published precious little but has had a large influence at Chicago, especially on George Stigler himself. On the other side of the Atlantic, Arnold Plant was similarly reluctant to publish yet influenced students at LSE including Ronald Coase, Arthur Lewis, Basil Yamey, Ronald Fowler, Arthur Seldon among others. What might be said is that today, a research economist who seldom published would be unable to retain a position at a major research institute. This would be the main constraint limiting his or her effectiveness as a teacher.

<sup>5</sup> This was all part of Stigler's strong belief in a need to market one's theories by presenting them in the strongest and most positive way possible, whether or not entirely justified by the empirical evidence available.

<sup>6</sup> Colander (1991 (see especially pp.75-80) and 2001) argues convincingly that undergraduate and graduate teaching inhabit two quite separable worlds. The skills needed for success in one region are distinct from that required in the other. The argument is sensibly based on the difference in the relevant markets.

It is only when they are faced with the reality of teaching students who are completely indifferent to what the teachers are doing that they acquire, through on-the-job training, a knowledge of economic institutions sufficient to get by in the classroom. But it's no thanks to their graduate training. Graduate economics students receive little useful training for teaching undergraduates (Colander 1991: 77).

<sup>7</sup> The process is very much a 'learning by doing' procedure. Sceptics will wonder whether under such circumstances any noticeable learning curve can be detected.

Even for individual graduate departments running their own programs as offshoots, the attitude appears to be that there are only 'some incidental benefits for the graduate instructors' current (undergraduate) students" (Becker 1997:1362).

<sup>8</sup> This has been a consistent finding of all and any attempts to engage in either anecdotal or empirical analysis of the profession (see Colander and Klamer 1987 on this point.)

Teachers discover, at least at the elite institutions, that the rewards and respect are reserved for the researchers. Teaching is not a topic of conversation among the movers and shakers of the profession (Klamer 1992:55).

<sup>9</sup> If we were dealing with the field of research, charges of plagiarism might arise. Perhaps as an indication of the low esteem in which it is held, such practices in the field of teaching are seen as simply carrying on a particular (and honored) tradition. Uncritical homage, of this type, also propagates and sustains myths in the profession as well.

Larry Neal's Presidential Address to the Economic History Association is entitled, "A Shocking View of Economic History." Early on he pays "Tribute to the spirit of Alexander Gershenkron because, sitting through repeated lectures by first Paul David, then at Berkeley by Albert Fishlow, and finally Henry Rosovsky, I heard Gershenkron's most memorable lectures at least three separate time!" (Saffran 2001:256).

<sup>10</sup> See Becker's 1997 article on this point.

<sup>11</sup> George Stigler certainly had no room for individual psychology in his own research (see Stigler 1963a: 12, one among many places). He steered strictly clear of the type of hubris so clearly displayed by Oedipus (at least as depicted by Sophocles). For him there was always a clear division between the public man and the private individual. Throughout his life Stigler made a concerted and successful attempt to keep them apart. (To such an

extent that the private man remained hidden from view for most, if not all his colleagues.) He firmly believed that biographical details shed no light on intellectual ideas.

I am a strong supporter of the view that a knowledge of the life of a scholar is more often a source of misunderstanding than of enlightenment about his work (Stigler 1997:111),

<sup>12</sup> It is impossible to speak to anyone who knew him, however slightly, without having them relate the scars Stigler could inflict by using his all too ready wit. One economist I spoke to in Chicago (October 1997) recalled that meeting Stigler was the only time he had been gratuitously insulted in his life. Or as Gary Becker put it, 'Given the choice of making a smart remark or not hurting someone's feeling, Stigler would always choose to make a smart remark'. (Conversation with Becker, October 1997),

<sup>13</sup> Too much reverence for a supervisor can prove equally dangerous for a graduate student. In Paul Samuelson's opinion, the very awe in which some students at Chicago held Knight, undercut their own efforts.

In fact, Knight's major influence at that time resulted in the view that Knight had done everything and there was nothing left to do. So, he was the cause that a pretty important generation of Chicago economists never got their PhD degrees (Conversation with Paul Samuelson, October 1997).

<sup>14</sup> This points out a clear contradiction in George Stigler as an individual. His public face (what Sam Peltzman refers to (Conversation with him, October 1997) as projecting an image of the 'Protestant Father' figure) contrasted with a privately generous individual. He for some reason felt driven to remain publicly consistent with his own economic model (if that isn't a too far-fetched interpretation to suggest).

When George was skeptical as I said about the altruism issue I said, 'Look George, look how generous you are to your children. Are you doing that out of self-interested motives? Who are you kidding? You're not doing it out of that.' And he looked at me and he didn't answer. He knew he was doing that out of self-interested motives (Conversation with Gary Becker, October 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Miller's 1962 article on the Chicago school makes this point indirectly. Most Chicago students did dissertations with those members of the faculty that closely supervised (lowered the cost of doing) a dissertation.

In the year 1959-60 ... Chicago students showed substantially less interest in the fields of industrial organization, public finance and fiscal policy, economic history and development and international economics, than their counterparts at Harvard or Columbia, separately or together. Two-thirds of the thesis subjects fell in the three fields of land economics, labor economics, and monetary economics (Miller 1962:68-69).

<sup>16</sup> Frank Knight had only a handful of students, but three of them were Henry Simons, George Stigler and James Buchanan.

<sup>17</sup> This would explain the 'odd couple' friendship with Robert Solow. Both men could be described as being extremely witty, intelligent and capable of expert verbal sparring.

<sup>18</sup> There is no evidence whatsoever that Stigler was ever deliberately malicious. He never intended to hurt someone intentionally. As his friends and colleagues point out, his criticism was never personal. But his words could have a devastating effect on established academics (reducing them to tears), let alone students. He never adjusted his rules of engagement to those of lesser ability. George Stigler displayed no real respect for individuals who were unwilling or incapable of playing according to his own hard nose methods. Here you do tread a very fine line, since by destroying opposing arguments in his inimitable scorched earth fashion; he left whoever was at the receiving end feeling stupid, inadequate and angry. Had Stigler's motives been focused at a more personal level, which they were not, the results still would have appeared to be much the same.

<sup>19</sup> He continued to be supportive of both Blaug and Peltzman throughout their subsequent careers. To some degree he regarded Peltzman as his protégée and pushed for his appointment at Chicago, even to the point of putting up research money from his own (Walgreen) account. It was a different story with Thomas Sowell who in many ways Stigler found wanting. Being a man who never minced his words, Stigler made his view of Sowell clear whenever he was asked for a recommendation. In his own reminiscence of George Stigler, Sowell (1993) hints at the underlying strife, but generally chooses to adopt a more discreet and politic 'de mortuis nil nisi bonum' approach.

<sup>20</sup> Note the parallel to Mark Blaug's comments concerning George Stigler:

I don't think he was a particularly good lecturer. But the lectures were like a lot of his articles. Lots of sarcastic jokes, very arrogant, quite cynical (Conversation with Mark Blaug, June 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Don Patinkin relates his initial failure at first attempting to take Knight's class.

... leaning on the back of a chair, occasionally puffing on a corn-cob pipe – and rambling on in a high-pitched voice and in a disjointed manner on mysterious issues that certainly cast no light on the newly revealed truth which was then being enthusiastically explicated everywhere ... after a few such bewildering experiences, I gave up in despair (Patinkin 1973:788)

<sup>22</sup> This extended to using parochial examples that would fail to register in the minds of foreign students.

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I used to be shepherding these Latinos through and here they would come to some question in his [Stigler's] price theory examination. 'Explain something, something about the *Dred Scott Decision*.' It drove me up the wall. How could he bear to ask a question like that when more than half the students were from abroad? (Conversation with Arnold Harberger, October 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Stigler was certainly never long winded, whether in his publications, the classroom, (or in destroying an opponent). But demanding that others fill in the links or follow up the implications of a brief sketch of an argument does not seem a widely effective approach to teaching.

I had carefully prepared by outlining the first five or six weeks of the twelve-week quarter. About forty-five minutes into the class hour I found myself at the end of my notes! I was filled with consternation. I might last out the first session, but what about the rest of the quarter? I believe that this is not an unusual experience for new teachers, but I must admit that I have never reached the abundance of knowledge that made the time in the classroom seem inadequate (Stigler 1988:19).

<sup>24</sup> John Hicks is one of a number of renowned economists who fit into this category.

Whether the subjects on which he lectured did not really interest him or for some other reason, Hicks failed to inspire his undergraduate audience. However, Hicks's standing at LSE soon underwent a dramatic change. In 1931, at Robbins's instigation, in part because he had some mathematical training, Hicks began to give lectures on advanced economic theory and his power as a theorist was immediately apparent (Coase 1994:210).

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