



# Teaching Economics in a Multi-cultural Classroom: Lessons Learned in the Former Soviet Union

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# Introduction

- Teaching undergraduate economics involves teaching students new vocabulary and new ways of thinking
- The complexity is compounded as the culture of teacher and students becomes more dissimilar



# Objectives

- Provide practical information for anyone going abroad to teach economics
- Share specific insights for those teaching in Central Asia
- Apply some lessons learned to teaching economics in any setting



# Cross-cultural Teaching Experience

- Technological University of Tajikistan,  
Dushanbe, Tajikistan  
January 2007 to September 2012
- Keiin Institute of Business and Sciences  
Ivanovka, Kyrgyzstan  
July 2013 to May 2015



Bishkek,  
Kyrgyzstan

Dushanbe,  
Tajikistan



# Economies in Transition

- Both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were Soviet States
- Gained independence in 1991
- Students I was working with were born around 1991
- Grew up in a turbulent era with lots of talk of reform, market economies, development, etc.



# Teaching Economics Across Cultures

- Long-term perspective and experience are rare
- See the learning process
- Engage in exams and grading
- See the same students in multiple courses



# Teaching Economics Across Cultures

- Jargon, idioms, and acronyms
  - Screen lectures
  - Provide list of (likely) new terms in advance
  - Encourage interaction and participation in defining terms

# Teaching Economics Across Cultures

- Examples and Illustrations
  - Textbooks with an American or Western perspective
  - Students lack the context from which to understand illustrations
  - Local currency and measurement units

# Teaching Economics Across Cultures

- Perceptions of Markets and Capitalism
  - 2010 Gallup poll: 61% of Americans had a favorable view of capitalism, 86% a positive view of free enterprise
  - Pew Center research showed attitudes toward changing to a market economy declined from 1991 to 2011 in Ukraine and Lithuania

# Teaching Economics Across Cultures

- Perceptions of Markets and Capitalism
  - I regularly encountered negative impressions of markets, capitalism, and entrepreneurship among students, faculty, and others
  - Much of their negativity is visceral and not academic



# Teaching Economics Across Cultures

- Perceptions of Markets and Capitalism
  - Let them complain and criticize, engage their concerns
  - At the introductory level, stress the assumptions being made and that market failures happen and will be addressed
  - Look for ways that basic supply and demand forces work in the host culture



# Teaching Economics Across Cultures

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# Teaching Economics Across Cultures

- Power Distance

- Post-Soviet cultures have a large power distance between professor and student
- Relating to students, as Americans understand it, can be awkward
- Office hours can be hard to explain



# Teaching Economics Across Cultures

- Power Distance

- Still implement creative, interactive methods
- Be patient
- Be prepared to face some reticence or outright opposition

# Applying the Lessons in Any Culture

- Specialized language
  - Students need economic vocabulary
  - Be careful of using it in the explanation phase
  - At the introductory level, build in vocabulary learning as a learning objective



# Applying the Lessons in Any Culture

- Creative and Varied Examples
  - Use a variety of examples
  - Look for examples that resonate with students



# Applying the Lessons in Any Culture

- Do Not Assume a Favorable View of Markets or Capitalism
  - Sentiment on these matters seems to be shifting
  - Lots of baggage with the term capitalism
  - Recognize the visceral nature of reactions
  - Consider the diverse backgrounds of your students



# Conclusions

- For those going to the former Soviet Union (specifically, Central Asia), know what to expect
- As US classrooms become more and more diverse, recognize you are, in some ways, teaching across cultures here
- Use the same ideas that help bridge cultural differences



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