

Behavioral Economics:

Forward and Acknowledgements:

The idea of introducing behavioral economics into the high school classroom is controversial. When I presented the idea to a group of economic educators a couple of years ago, the idea was resoundingly rejected. The fear was that mainstream economics would somehow be diminished by the idea that people do not always behave in a rational matter. The preference of the group was that mainstream economics should be a high school student's first exposure to economics, and that more subtle points like behavioral economics be reserved for later in a student's academic career – like their senior year in college. Nonetheless, I decided to pursue doing this module for the CEE. As my fellow economic educator Bill Becker would say, “teach the controversies.” It is not a surprise to high school students or teachers that people do not always behave as traditional economic theory might predict, so why not tell the student why? Ultimately, no behavioral economist I have talked to ever suggests throwing aside mainstream ideas – traditional economics does a great job of explaining so much about the world, it would be irresponsible to ignore its teachings. But, behavioral economics adds to the conversation in a way high school kids can appreciate.

This module was much more difficult to construct than I had imagined. The interesting experiments and results found by behavioral economists are conducted in labs under controlled circumstances. Replication of these experiments in a classroom we found to be difficult. However, through a lot of trial and error, we managed to create lessons that we think will “work” most of the time. Of course, as with any set of lessons that involve student participation, individual results may vary.

A lot of folks helped with the creation of the lessons:

First and foremost, Brigitte Madrian of Harvard University was the content advisor for the project. She provided ample advice, and, more importantly, was helpful in suggesting alternatives when something did not work out in our field tests. Many of the lessons contain information from her classes and research. Without her patient help, this module would not be as interesting and fun as it is.

Second, our field testers provided valuable feedback. We redesigned two lessons completely based on the feedback provided by our classroom teachers. Our field testers were:

- Rob Frackelton, Oxbridge Academy, West Palm Beach, Florida
- Heather Tirino, Mahwah High School, Mahwah, New Jersey
- Anthony Swierzbinski, John Dickinson High School, Wilmington, Delaware
- Rebecca Bush, Seminole Ridge Community High School, West Palm Beach, Florida
- Allen Ruliffson, J. Frank Hillyard Middle School, Broadway, Virginia
- Eric Fields, Mandarin High, Jacksonville, Florida
- Gabriel A. Tanglao, Bergenfield High School, Bergenfield, New Jersey
- Catherine McRoy-Mendell, Stuyvesant High School, New York

Finally, my partner in this project was Andrea Caceres-Santamaria. Andrea is a teacher at Seminole Ridge High School and a master teacher at the FAU Center for Economic Education. She completed her masters in economic education at the University of Delaware in June 2016. Andrea took on this project with gusto. Her six economics classes, along with her colleague Rebecca Bush's psychology classes, provided the testing ground for many of the first ideas (some good, some bad) of how to teach these lessons. For example, in one attempt, we created an experiment where the students had the choice between playing a game or studying for a quiz. While we had hoped the students would procrastinate the studying in favor of the game, unfortunately, her AP students decided studying was always their first choice – resulting in redesign of the lesson. Andrea also spent an inordinate amount of time researching the subject, reading book after book. (Dan Ariely is her favorite.) Ultimately, I think her dedication shows in the lessons.

Of course, the project would not be possible without the support of the Council for Economic Education. Christopher Caltabiano, Chief Program Officer, is always a steady influence on all programs. Rochelle Diogenes, Director of Educational Resources, provided useful comments and has the big task of introducing modules like this one online in the Council's redesigned EconEdLink.

Bill Bosshardt, Director, FAU Center for Economic Education