

Citizens and the Economy

'How the economy functions' comes straight from the Citizenship programme of study. It sets a challenge for many teachers. When asked about it, people respond with strong statements ranging from 'scary' to 'difficult'. But why? Students have been doing economics from infancy. They just haven't linked it to the jargon. When toddling round a supermarket, making choices between one toy and another, they are 'doing' economics but no-one is going to mention opportunity cost – and quite right too. Students who are looking at the economy within Citizenship do not need to be deafened by jargon. They should be looking at the way the economy works from a citizen's point of view.

A citizen's view of the economy

QCA have always advocated a light touch for the whole programme and this is exactly what is needed for the way the economy functions. At the end of a citizenship course, students should be well prepared to make their own decision about casting their vote in elections. As the choices are often between the political parties' different approaches to the economy, an adequate understanding of the relationships within the economic system is important.

Citizens also look at the economy from many different perspectives. Helping students to appreciate that other people hold different views is fundamental to Citizenship. Standing in someone else's shoes is challenging. It can also make individuals reconsider their own perspective.

What are the issues?

A school's approach to looking at the economy in a Citizenship course will depend on the strategy for teaching the subject. If it is taught discretely, the economy can be incorporated into the scheme of work. If it is cross curricular, it will be more difficult because there is not a natural home for it within the KS3 and KS4 curriculum. Some students will come across it in GCSE Business Studies and a much smaller number in Economics. An off-timetable day can be used to meet the requirements and help students to make links and connection by putting ideas into practice.

As with the rest of the Citizenship programme of study, time available and depth are key issues which must be addressed. The two are closely inter-related as, in a short time frame, the students must be provided with an appropriate experience which allows their understanding to develop sufficiently to make reasoned judgements about economic issues.

An integrated approach may be more profitable. By using themes, students can see how areas of Citizenship knowledge and skills are integrated to help them to evaluate situations. A case study about a road accident, for example, can flag up

a wide range of issues of relevance. Just try drawing a spider diagram of all those involved to build a picture of how such a topic can draw themes together.

A further issue is teachers' knowledge and understanding. Many feel intimidated because their own understanding is uncertain. Others know too much and may be in danger of overloading students with detail and complexity. Resources can be the key as they provide guidance on the appropriate depth for the course. Teachers may, however, need support in using them if they are to achieve the desired outcomes.

Getting it right?

There are three key ideas that should underpin any work on the economy. Whatever the approach taken to fitting the material into the curriculum, these should be incorporated into the learning strategies that are used because they will help students to understand the issues that are being considered.

- Trade offs

Students can begin to appreciate that you can't have everything and that people, schools, organisations and governments have to make trade offs. They generally have a clear picture of what this means for themselves but are prone to say "They must" when referring to government spending. This response raises two issues. First of all, it shows that the government is being approached as an autonomous organisation rather than a democratically elected body. Helping students to move to 'we' from 'they' may help to overcome this attitude. Secondly, It demonstrates that there is little understanding of the trade offs involved in increasing spending in one area.

Considering their own spending and saving decisions can easily lead into an understanding of similar decisions made by their school or other organisations they know about, businesses and governments. Spending and borrowing can be dealt with in the same way, especially as debt is now a critical issue for many young people.

A surprising number of adults have no appreciation of the link between government spending and taxation. This encourages the "they must ..." attitude. Students may decide that more should be spent but should appreciate that taxes need to be raised to pay the bill. For many taxes are 'a bad thing' so it can be useful to challenge this perception by questioning how life would be without them.

- Inter-relationships

Inter-relationships form a theme which runs through the Citizenship programme. If something changes, there are knock on effects for others.

Within any work on the economy, students should appreciate that there are links between people and people, people and businesses, people and government and between countries. Whatever the issues, a spider diagram quickly shows who will be affected by an event. It can be used to weigh up the costs and benefits of change – which brings us back to trade offs.

- Perspectives

Most of us look at the world from our own point of view. Until we learn to realise that other people have perfectly valid perspectives, we find it hard to approach issues with a broader view.

Asking students to put the case for their point of view means that they have to do some critical thinking which may help them to understand the issue more fully. Asking them to do the same thing from another point of view can really make them think hard about their own motives and the standpoint of others. A stakeholder model is invaluable when dealing with the way the economy functions as it incorporates the point of view of all the players in a situation.

Every school is different so the approach to this section of the programme of study will inevitably vary. The more integrated and active, the students' experience, the more effective their learning is likely to be.

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