

Teaching Economic Inequality through a Lens of Justice and Philosophy



An approach to Economic Inequality

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What does this mean?

For the discussion of justice, I want students to consider:

1. What do we owe each other? (Good Place is a nice reference point here)
2. How much inequality can we tolerate in a society? This usually leads to question around what we mean by ideas of “just” and “fair”

Philosophical thinking around the topic is used because it helps students understand how others have thought about these questions.

Objectives of this approach

1. Deeper thinking - students have a better way to express themselves and speak to their views. They can reflect on complex questions and understand their answers.
2. Build connections/go beyond data - the data and numbers in the gini coefficient, the percentages of people living in poverty, and other ideas are hard to understand on their own. Philosophy helps students think about the bigger picture
3. Building solutions - Helps students consider why they value certain approaches to poverty and inequality
4. See others, and understand the challenges we all encounter

Understanding my teaching context

It is important to note a few things about my context because this drives some of my decision making

1. I teach at a full IB private school near Calgary, Alberta. Cost of tuition is high, and it is unusual for students to experience poverty in their lives.
2. I teach, or have taught, history, law, international politics and social studies
3. Part of the IB is TOK - Theory of Knowledge - and a key piece is ethics and morality of knowledge. This focuses on what obligations an individual has when they have obtained knowledge
4. IB Economics - This topic is introduced to discuss economic inequality and poverty in macroeconomics, but it is also used to discuss developmental economics and the poverty cycle in global economics.

How does this model work?

Before the economic lessons, I usually do two things:

1. Run a simulation based on Rawls and the veil of ignorance - [video to support idea](#)
2. Then get students to understand Rawls through a [podcast](#)

The simulation usually runs into a deep discussion of what we think of when we consider fairness and what type of society we would like to live in.

The podcast on Rawls gives us the language to have a deeper discussion, and then start to critique and ask questions about Rawls' ideas

Rawls and Original Position

We start the simulation like this:

I ask students to consider the Original Position and Veil of Ignorance:

1. Imagine you are about to be born into the world. For our simulation, we assume modern Canada.
2. However, you are fully aware - you understand the reality of society and what it looks like
3. You have no control over the type of home you will be born into

Based on this, what are the conditions of society that you would like to see to ensure that you have the best chance to be successful in life

Nozick as a critique of Rawls

We then get into a discussion about Rawls' ideas by looking at his harshest critic at the time - Nozick. Again, students can listen to the podcast from the same series, and we usually watch this [video](#).

This allows us to dig into “how much inequality is acceptable in a society” and gives students another approach.

Philosophy helps students understand what they think and why - this is critical.

Idea of Meritocracy

Now, we have to deal with Nozick's notion that people ought to be awarded based on their skill, and we ask about the idea of meritocracy.

Here we introduce [Michael Sandel](#) and the ideas of tyranny of merit. We will supplement this with work by Daniel Chandler.

Tools for discussion

4 As

Adapted from Judith Gray, Seattle, WA 2005

1. The group reads the text silently, highlighting it and writing notes in the margin on post-it notes in answer to the following four questions (you can also add your own "A"s)
 - What Assumptions does the author of the text hold?
 - What do you Agree with in the text?
 - What do you want to Argue with in the text?
 - What parts of the text do you want to Aspire to?
2. In a round, have each person identify one assumption in the text, citing the text (with page numbers, if appropriate) as evidence.
3. Either continue in rounds or facilitate a conversation in which the group talks about the text in light of each of the remaining "A"s, taking them one at a time – what do people want to argue with, agree with, and aspire to in the text? Try to move seamlessly from one "A" to the next, giving each "A" enough time for full exploration.

Inequality of opportunity

We often get into larger discussions about inequality that delve into issues of why inequality persists.

We will supplement this with work by [Caroline Criado-Perez](#) as we discuss ideas around gender gaps and gender inequality.

This always leads to good discussions on how we view inequality, and causes of inequality.

Global Economics

As a piece when we get to global economics and poverty, we discuss the ideas of Singer and the value of human life.

This allows us to get into the ideas of the Poverty Cycle and further answer “What do we owe each other?”

It also allows us to get into solutions, and causes of poverty on a global level.

There are numerous case studies we examine here, but the IB often prescribes LDCs so we examine a current LDC and a graduated LDC at the least.

Supplementary source to Global Economics

While doing this work, I also like to make use of the following resource:

<https://www.gapminder.org/dollar-street>

This source helps students visualise inequality and poverty in a much more detailed way. It helps them make sense of ideas like extreme poverty, absolute poverty and relative poverty.

Other supplementary material

I also tend to use music and film to help us navigate units and material.

At the start of this unit, I like to use Charles Bradley - Why is it so hard to make it in America



Parasite as a film discussion

This came out of the pandemic and need to adjust delivery of material

We used the film *Parasite* to discuss economic inequality in South Korea.

Students watch the film critically, and answer the question, “how well does the film *Parasite* portray the issues of economic inequality in South Korea?”

This allows the students to research issues such as the impact of education systems in Korea, gender inequality, issues of an aging population, the lack of competition in key industries and the role of chaebols.

Other possible approaches for music

There is a really nice discussion about the musical Hamilton and how it displays the idea of merit and the American Dream.

If you feel like it, there is a nice contrast between how Jay-Z approaches the path to success versus how 2Pac viewed this path. You'd need to have considerable time on your hands; I do not.

Contact information

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