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## A first step toward a practice-based theory of pedagogical content knowledge in secondary economics ☆

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how three award-winning secondary economic teachers demonstrated their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), specifically horizon content knowledge, specialized content knowledge, knowledge of content and teaching, and knowledge of content and students. The teachers consistently connected economic content to other grades, subjects, and economic concepts and skills. Economic content was also regularly used to prepare students for citizenship, including casting more informed votes and understanding current events. However, authentic discussions, including ones about controversial issues, were mostly lacking. An emphasis was placed on developing students' economic reasoning skills, including real-world applications of the *economic way of thinking* and decision-making models. Active learning instructional practices were also frequently incorporated, and economic content was almost always related to students' interests and experiences. A detailed description of a first step toward a practice-based theory of PCK in secondary economics concludes the article.

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### Introduction

Nearly two-thirds of high school students and half of adults in the United States do not understand the most basic economic concepts (CEE, 1999; Harris, 2005) such as the impact of supply and demand on consumer prices and the ways in which both free markets and government interventions sometimes fail to promote economic growth and prosperity. Moreover, only 20 states currently require students to take a separate economic course to graduate, while only 16 states require student testing of economic concepts (CEE, 2016). This lack of understanding and low prioritization of economics are especially concerning in a democratic nation that depends on an informed citizenry to make productive and prosperous decisions not only on an individual basis but on a societal level as well.

Similar sentiments regarding the importance of economic education is expressed by 97% of Americans who believe that economics should be taught in our nation's schools (Harris, 2005). However, low levels of economic understanding have predominately characterized U.S. citizens since the inception of economic education standardized testing in 1976 (Becker, Greene, & Rosen, 1990). On average, both adults and high school students have consistently earned a failing test score on the

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Test of Economic Literacy (Walstad & Rebeck, 2001), despite the commonly agreed upon importance of U.S. citizens having a basic understanding of economics (VanFossen, 2005–2006).

Beyond quantitative analyses of standardized test scores, a review of the literature base for economic education quickly reveals a scarcity of literature relative to other social studies subjects such as history and civics. At the conclusion of their economic education literature reviews, both Schug and Walstad (1991) and Miller and VanFossen (2008) call for qualitative, observational studies to investigate specific instructional practices at the secondary level that are most effective in improving students' economic knowledge and skills. This call for research is in keeping with what education scholars in other disciplines argue is necessary to improve instruction: a research focus on instructional practices rather than teacher credentials in pursuit of understanding what helps students learn (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Hiebert & Morris, 2012).

Likewise, Shulman (1987) called for an increase of “wisdom of practice” case studies that systematically investigate and report the interactions between teacher knowledge and instructional practices demonstrated by exemplary teachers. According to Shulman, “One of the more important tasks for the research community is to work with practitioners to develop codified representations of the practical pedagogical wisdom of able teachers” (p. 11) with emphasis on understanding pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)—“the blending of content and pedagogy” unique to each subject (p. 8). Findings from such studies should serve as standards of practice for each subject and should be taught to preservice and inservice teachers (Hiebert & Morris, 2012; Shulman, 1987). In other words, zeroing in on actual teacher knowledge and instructional practices unique to particular subjects is necessary in developing a “practice-based conceptualization of content knowledge for teaching” (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008, p. 398).

Therefore, this qualitative case study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the PCK in secondary economics demonstrated by three award-winning secondary economic teachers—one social studies teacher and two Career and Technical Education (CTE) teachers. The following research question guided this study:

How do award-winning, secondary economic teachers demonstrate pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in their instruction in terms of horizon content knowledge, specialized content knowledge, knowledge of content and teaching, and knowledge of content and students?

This study was designed to establish a first step toward understanding the types of teacher knowledge and skills needed for effective economic instruction that might contribute to increasing student achievement in economics and better preparing students for citizenship.

## Theoretical framework

Of special importance in studying subject-specific teacher instruction is Shulman's (1987) notion of PCK, which attempts to bridge the content versus pedagogy divide. While Shulman believes that having both content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge are important elements of a teacher's knowledge base, he argued that, in isolation, they were insufficient in understanding the highly nuanced knowledge base used by exemplary teachers when delivering instructional practices that improve student learning in particular subjects. Consequently, Shulman introduced PCK as a new category of teacher knowledge defined as

...the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction. Pedagogical content knowledge is the category most likely to distinguish the understanding of the content specialist from that of the pedagogue. (p. 8)

That is, effective teachers not only need to have a firm grasp of the most important content in a subject but also “the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations—in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others” (p. 9). It is what separates an economic major from an economic teacher.

Known as the “bridge between the academic world of disciplinary knowledge and the practice world of teaching” (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008, p. 398), PCK has remained influential across subjects since its inception by providing a framework within which to describe the types of knowledge teachers need to deliver quality instruction. This unique blend of content and pedagogy has, however, been interpreted and applied differently by various education researchers (e.g., Ball et al., 2008; Magnusson, Krajcik, & Borko, 1999; Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Nevertheless, commonalities exist across the various conceptualizations of PCK that remain true to Shulman's original thinking (van Driel, Verloop, & DeVos, 1998). One commonality is the notion that PCK defines the teacher knowledge needed to transform and represent content knowledge in a way that accounts for diverse student learning needs. Also rarely disputed are the ideas that PCK is subject-specific, differs from content knowledge, and develops interactively with instructional practices.

Therefore, PCK as a theoretical framework has heuristic value for conceptualizing the types of teacher knowledge needed for effective instructional practices (Ball et al., 2008; Mishra & Koehler, 2006). More specifically, PCK frameworks are useful in developing a nuanced understanding of the types of teacher knowledge needed to deliver effective instruction in a way

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