



Introduction

Our seminar examined economic inequality in the United States. We discussed inequality's rise in recent decades, debated the harm caused by this rise, and considered policies designed to equalize resources and opportunities.

We spent much of our time considering foundational questions of inequality from a social scientific perspective. These questions included: How do we measure inequality? What causes inequality? Is inequality harmful *per se* or is it merely a symptom of other economic ills? How much harm to the economies of developing countries are we willing to tolerate in order to reduce inequality at home?

The curriculum units motivated by our seminar reflect many of these recurring themes. In confronting these questions, the units use inequality as a lens for enlivening and enriching discussion of a wide range of subjects. As many of the Fellows observed during the seminar, the students of New Haven (and many other districts) need no proof of inequality. They experience inequality every day by attending a school district with such a diverse student body, in a district whose residents span the range of American socioeconomic backgrounds, from the destitute to the intellectual and financial elite.

Because of this familiarity, inequality offers a way to introduce essential topics in the curriculum in a way that engages the students by connecting with their lives. If a lesson helps explain the inequality the students experience directly, then students may be more receptive to the material than if the same lesson were applied to a topic more removed from the students' lives.

Many of the units exploit the inherent interest of the topic as an alternative frame for teaching. William McKinney's unit develops an AP economics course structured around understanding inequality, on the theory that this structure may engage students more than a course with similar lessons structured around a more abstract pursuit of "Pareto efficiency". Aparna Shyam's unit teaches regression analysis to statistics students by having the students investigate the causes of inequality between school districts. Eden Stein's unit teaches fundamental economic concepts, such as the role of money, through unexpected sources such as "The Hunger Games" series of novels and movies. James Brochin encourages the collection of data by students in a journalism class by having students distribute surveys to ascertain popular understandings of the words "middle class" or "American dream." After reading these engaging units, it is easy to understand the Fellows' enthusiasm for this alternative teaching frame.

In debating the causes and consequences of inequality, we repeatedly relied on data to support our assertions and test our hypotheses. Focusing on data helped structure our discussion of a topic that could easily lead in myriad different directions.

This emphasis on data is also reflected in the curriculum units developed by the seminar Fellows. Each of the units integrates data with the lessons of the unit. For example, several of the units developed by Fellows teaching language arts and other humanities subjects provide a new perspective on works of literature or art by using data to provide a more precise and analytical perspective to concerns traditionally developed via narrative. Christine Pidskalny's unit examines the legacy of economic inequality with her "Social Justice Theatre" students by exploring, among other empirical questions, the incredibly strong link between the income of parents and children uncovered in recent economic research. Barbara Sasso provides critical background for her discussion of the drama "A Raisin in the Sun" by providing an empirical sense of the economic stakes of the decisions that form the heart of the play. Carolyn Streets uses a range of economic data to help explain why the class tensions that underly the novel "The Outsiders" can seem insurmountable. And Robert Schwartz reflects on the fading of the American social fabric by referring to a range of data demonstrating dramatically different educational opportunities as a function of parental income and status.

In addition to their inherent interest, all of the units show the potential learning benefits of integrating different modes of understanding from across disciplines to create a robust and stimulating learning environment.

The passions stirred by confronting economic inequality were on regular display in our seminar and animate the curriculum units that follow. It is my hope that future instructors will find the material just as engaging.

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