

Reflections of a Textbook Author (Mankiw, 2020)

Nicholas Gregory Mankiw is a renowned economist whom several students get to know while passing through Introduction to Economics classes. His excellent introductory microeconomics and macroeconomics textbooks are widely used in universities worldwide.

One Sentence Summary

The author reflects on his career as economic textbook writer. He addresses the role of a textbook, the content of a micro or macro introductory textbook, how its content evolves and who should become a textbook author.

Main Findings

Mankiw sees instructors of introductory economics as ambassadors of the field. The instructor should simply explain the main concepts of economic thinking. They should be wary of including too many details in their lectures. At the end, there is a trade-off between the amount of details and the students learning.

A textbook should be universal, impartial, and flexible. Topics where economists have reached a consensus should be included in an introductory textbook. For example, closing commercial barriers reduces welfare and how tax cuts can decrease tax revenue. For this purpose, it is important to include a simple and flexible economic model which can explain those topics is particularly important. Additionally, a good textbook should include an impartial discussion on controversial topics in economics. Lastly, it should be flexible to give enough material for instructors to decide the structure of their class and what content to include. Because the textbook reflects the authors own judgments, and not necessarily the instructors.

An introductory economics textbook should evolve alongside economic thinking. For example, newer versions of Mankiw's introductory textbook include a chapter of behavioral economics, a field that has gathered popularity in the last decade. The textbook should also keep up with technology advancements, hence most textbooks available in digital and physical formats.

Only those who enjoy the process of writing should become textbook authors. Because the writing and revision loop will be endless. As a test the author asks: do you like to read books about writing? If you do, you can pursue textbook writing and he wishes you the best. Just remember, he will compete against you.

Concluding Remarks

I highly encourage teachers and students to read this essay. On one hand, teachers that follow Mankiw's advice will have an easier time planning the structure for their course. On the other, students will understand the objective of textbook writers and teachers, which will increase their understanding of the subject. After all, Mankiw enjoys both reading, teaching, and creating economics textbooks.

References

- Mankiw, N.G., 2020. Reflections of a Textbook Author. J. Econ. Lit. 58, 215–228.
<https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20191589>. A free version of the essay is available on this [link](#).