
Foreword

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1 Contents of the current issue

1.1 *Economics*

This issue begins with Arne Heise's article, 'Whither economic complexity? A new heterodox economic paradigm or just another variation within the mainstream?' After noting that economics is in considerable disarray and that neoclassical orthodoxy still remains the 'normal science' providing the foundation for economic education; at the same time, many people have argued for a complete reconceptualisation of economics and economics education. Is complexity economics a natural and logical focal point? Hence, the importance of the article's subtitle.

Heise first describes the paradigmatic (a la Kuhn and Lakatos) substance and foundations of complexity economics¹; he then places complexity economics within the categorical context of orthodox v. heterodox, along three levels: methodical, epistemological, and heuristic/ontological. This useful template/typology can be used for other heterodox sub-disciplines to distinguish between mainstream and heterodox. Based on his analysis, Heise concludes that, similar to Keynesian economics, there is a heterodox and a mainstream camp of complexity economics; and, although the latter is clearly within neoclassical economics, he rightfully labels it a 'dissenter'.

While the two complexity camps share much in common (e.g., belief in a large number of heterogenous interacting agents; bounded rationality; self-organisation; self-adaptability; nonlinear dynamics; and non-equilibrium) the main distinguishing difference is that the heterodox complexity camp advocates non-ergodicity, open systems and rejection of Walras' law; while the mainstream complexity camp assumes ergodicity, closed systems and the validity of Walras' Law. Putting the emerging complexity economics into perspective, Heise notes the earlier neoclassical capture of both Keynesianism and behavioural economics,

“potentially revolutionary new approaches became absorbed into the mainstream by emphasizing (and, maybe, mis-interpreting) the complementary parts and aspects of the new approach with the mainstream and by de-emphasizing its oppositional (heterodox) parts and aspects.”

Heise concludes that while both complexity camps will further the evolution of economics by providing more realism, neither will become the focal point of a new economics.

Salman Ahmed Shaikh's article 'Values in consumer choice: do they matter?' continues our ongoing special series on challenging economics icons.² Shaikh's article made me dust off my graduate level micro texts, bringing back memories of what I was taught. It is quite shameful that with so much going on in the world today, mainstream economics and especially micro "has not been really successful ... in contributing to the exploding problems of mankind" [Elsner, (2012), p.17]. Sad testimony to the overly deductive, simple optimisation, anti-historical, neoclassical graduate micro theory.³ Anyway, while perusing one of my old micro texts, I was struck by the consumer theory chapter's opening paragraph,

"The postulate of rationality is the customary point of departure in the theory of the consumer's behavior. The consumer *is assumed* to choose among the available alternatives in such a manner that the satisfaction derived from consuming commodities (in the broadest sense) is as large as possible. This *implies* that he [sic] is aware of the alternatives facing him and is capable of evaluating them." [Henderson and Quandt, (1980), p.5; emphasis added]

Rather than actively engage with data to empirically decide how consumers operate, we were force-fed these radical and gratuitous assumptions, which in turn became the foundation of the remainder of the course.

After a brief critical discussion of the assumptions of rational consumption, Shaikh writes,

"It is fair to say that the overwhelming evidence poses challenging questions to the suitability and efficacy of neoclassical models based on rational behaviour. Economists working with the utility maximization framework find it even more challenging to explain people's intended actions and choices to help others, i.e. pro-social behaviour."

Shaikh adds that "other social sciences are not always inclined to restrict consumer behavior within such a narrow framework". Indeed, is there any other discipline where tenets, assumptions, and theories are continued to be taught, long after they have been disproved?

Shaikh empirically tests the assumptions of rational consumer economics with a questionnaire, and not surprisingly finds little empirical support,

"In this study, we make a small attempt to show that exogenous preferences may not necessarily follow the narrow set of neoclassical axioms [...] in light of our empirical evidence, it is appropriate to acknowledge selflessness resulting in sacrifices, pro-social behaviour and pure altruism. [And] we should acknowledge supporting evidence that people help strangers, pay anonymously in charities, and sacrifice their wealth and even their lives in the pursuit of being a good person."

1.2 *Teaching economics*

In their much-discussed book, *The Econocracy*, authors Joe Earle, Cahal Moran and Zach Ward-Perkins (2017, p.3) note in their introduction that with "about 7000 languages in the world. The language of economics is one of the newest and least well-known, but it is rapidly becoming the most important". Add to this that many universities across the

globe (especially in developing nations) are offering English-only courses in order to attract students, resulting in a bifurcation of students into two camps: native and non-native English speakers, with the advantage to native speakers in learning economics.

While there has been a plethora of research suggesting new teaching strategies, very few studies discuss pedagogical methods that effectively help students who use English as a foreign language learn economics. To do so is the purpose of Shiou-Yen Chu's article, 'Teaching strategies for English-medium instruction economics courses'. Specifically, she offers several suggestions used in her introductory-level and intermediate-level economics to not only increase student cognitive ability but also to do double-duty by offering alternatives to the traditional chalk-and-talk, especially active and cooperative learning. In addition to positive results from her course evaluations she also presents her own evidence from a questionnaire suggesting positive and favourable results.

Chu's suggestive strategies are important, and comport very nicely with *The Econocracy's* criticism that economics is an elitist, non-democratic language. But if economics is to help all to provision, then its language must be accessible to all. It is worth quoting *The Econocracy's* argument in full (2017, p.151 and p.154),

"Economics should be a discipline that is open to public scrutiny and engages the public in a substantive, two-way dialogue. Questions about the economy go right to the heart of how we organize society, as well as our individual and collective values, and as a consequence, we all have a right to shape it [...] We need to decide what we want [the economy] to be through public discussion, but in order to have that discussion, everyone must first understand the language of the debate."

No one should be excluded, regardless of whether they are a native English speaker. Chu's article helps us work toward this important reformative goal.

1.3 Articles on curriculum reform

In the foreword to the *IJPEE's* inaugural issue, I wrote that we will publish "articles on any aspect of pluralism or economics education from the vantage of a specific region or country. Our objective is to raise pressing and provocative issues to foster a continuing dialogue on reforming economics education" [Reardon, (2009), p.3]. The *IJPEE* is proud to offer a forum for individuals across the globe to discuss how to implement pluralism in the classroom, the department, and the national curriculum. The article 'Curricular reform at Willamette University' by Nathan Sivers Boyce et al. continues this rich tradition.

At Willamette University, the old, monist curriculum was not working; after careful deliberation the entire Economics Department decided to implement a new pluralist-infused curriculum. The process took several years, with extensive reflection and dialogue both amongst department members and well-known specialists. In its revamping, the department focused on answering the following questions: how to organise economic thought; how to structure the curriculum to embed pluralism; and how to embody pluralism in the core courses. The end result was a new pluralist curriculum benefitting students, with encouraging early anecdotal evidence.

Their article emphasises the process of change, which is not exactly obvious; and hopefully it can serve as a helpful guide for other departments interested in making a

change. While the process was quite extensive, the authors conclude that it was well worth the effort,

“Preparing to teach the new curriculum has provided us an opportunity for substantive engagement as we learn new economics together. Moreover, the curriculum reform process has given us an opportunity (excuse?) to learn issues as well as discuss issues of teaching and learning. That, in turn, has given us a renewed sense of common purpose and ownership of the Economics major.”

A win-win situation for all.

1.4 The teaching commons

Jean Ingersoll Abbott’s article in the teaching commons section of the *IJPEE*, entitled ‘The teaching commons: peer financial education handout assignment’ is our third article on financial literacy.⁴ Not only is financial literacy important at a personal level (as many students accumulate significant debt) but, as Abbott notes, also from a societal perspective, “Financially literate individuals are important to society as their decisions add up to forces that move and shape markets, influence regulations, and ultimately determine our well-being”.

In her article, Abbott discusses a capstone assignment in her general education course ‘Financial Literacy and Capabilities’. The assignment is given within the context of peer education, which in turn involves student teaching/learning and conveying information both orally and written to their peers. Abbott notes from the literature that, “Peer education is well recognised as an effective method of conveying information and peer educators have the opportunity to develop leadership skills, practice communication and improve self-esteem”.

In this assignment, the student first selects a financial topic that interests her/him (e.g., buying/leasing a car; opening a checking account; buying car insurance online; cyber security and privacy, etc.); then he/she prepares a two page handout to be presented both orally and written to their classroom peers and the university community. Her article discusses the assignment template and its specific requirements. She notes the positive benefits both for her own students and the wider university community.

1.5 Commentary

Our ‘Roundtable Dialogue on pluralism’ published in 2015 has received a lot of attention, and has been frequently cited and quoted. It has fulfilled our original intention to serve as a catalyst for future dialogue and debate on pluralism. In this spirit, I invited Ioana Negru, a well-known pluralist/heterodox economist, and author of two well-cited *IJPEE* articles discussing the historical context and origins of pluralism (Negru, 2009, 2010). Both articles helped get the *IJPEE* off and running. In her commentary on the Roundtable Dialogue, Negru teams up with her sister Anca Negru, a free-lance journalist, writer, poet, translator and philosopher living in Sibiu, Romania. Their commentary offers insightful thoughts/critiques on pluralism, as well as its current and future development. Negru and Negru raise many fruitful and engaging points that should provide wonderful food for thought. From my perspective, I found most interesting and most agreeable the argument that, “we, in general, perceive pluralism, as a *modus vivendi*, a way of thinking,

of feeling and acting pluralistically”. Very true; so how do we implement and teach pluralism as a *modus vivendi*?

1.6 Book review

I know of no other discipline in which a plethora of books have recently emerged either critiquing the subject of economics, its content, or its textbooks and pedagogy. *The Economics Anti-Textbook: A Critical Thinker’s Guide to Microeconomics*, with its self-explanatory title, is a good example of this literature.⁵ In the first edition, Hill and Myatt (2010, p.254) wrote,

“Our fundamental aim . . . has been to provide economics students with the basic ideas with which they can begin to think critically about what they read in their textbooks . . . One needs to read with a critical eye, and to note what is omitted and what is unsupported. Such critical thinking will be rewarded with a very different and far more interesting perspective on the world.”

A central feature of the book is each chapter’s numerous ‘questions for your professor,’ “not so much to embarrass your professor, as to bring a deeper understanding of economics into the classroom” (2010, p.2).

Michael Derrer, of the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Switzerland), writes both a review of the first edition, and suggestions to incorporate in the second revision, expected soon. Derrer and Hill dialogued about the review and the suggestions, and Hill and Myatt will incorporate some of their suggestions in the forthcoming second edition.

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Notes

- 1 See Elsner (2012, especially pp.190–196) for a good comparison of complexity economics versus neoclassical economics.
- 2 For other articles in this series see Fletcher (2011) (Theory of Comparative Advantage); Panayotakis (2012) (Scarcity); Yu (2012) (Time); and Zaman (2013) (The invisible Hand).
- 3 In addition to Elsner's micro textbook, see Lee (2010) for informative suggestions (and a very helpful reading list) for teaching graduate level microeconomics.
- 4 The other articles are Figart (2012) and Jaeckel (2013).
- 5 For a cogent critique on the theory of the firm using an anti-text see Hill and Myatt (2012).