
Foreword

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1 Keynote address to the Rethinking Economics Festival, Amsterdam

From time to time we publish important addresses and keynotes that are significant in our quest to reconceptualise economics and economics education, and which we feel will interest our readers.¹ Irene van Staveren leads off our current issue with our third such address: her May 2019 keynote address to the Rethinking Economics Festival in Amsterdam, ‘Economic perspectives from the global south and why they matter for economics worldwide’.

Van Staveren writes that “even though the top in the economics discipline largely remains male and white, it is in the policy world that diversity is now seriously making headway.” We can learn a lot from these economists, whose achievements,

“go well beyond development economics, [demonstrating] the importance of epistemic pluralism [and] how standpoint epistemology from the global south, makes economics better and informs better policy making in today’s complex, volatile, and unequal world economy.”

2 Special section: economics education in the USA community colleges

The 1,051 community colleges in the USA enrol almost 50% of US undergraduates, and are a major source of economics instruction, comprising 40% of introductory economics enrolment. The community college offers a two-year degree, which for some students is terminal but for others is a cost-effective stepping stone to a traditional four-year institution.

But as Mark Maier and Tim Thornton write in their informative article ‘A survey of economics education at US community colleges’, “our knowledge of community college instruction is weak.” To redress and remedy, Maier and Thornton surveyed USA community college instructors of economics on a number of issues, including: professional support, meeting student needs, workload, textbooks used, the degree of pluralism in the curriculum, and online teaching. Their results paint a rich portrait of this important sector.

Mark Maier and Tim Thornton follow with a ‘Roundtable on economics education in community colleges’.² The roundtable’s five participants were invited based on their extensive experience teaching in community colleges, their previous research on

community colleges, or their expertise on US economics education in general. Maier and Thornton write,

“because community colleges support the educational development of a far more representative sample of the US population, they are uniquely placed to assist the economics profession to remedy its underperformance in promoting greater diversity [and pluralism] within economics. Increased support for community colleges would assist them to increase the number of students transferring into four-year colleges. This would be a key avenue for greater diversity amongst the four-year college student cohort.”

And for those of us wanting to rethink economics and economics education, and to make economics education more pluralist, a fruitful starting point is the community college sector.

3 Special section: interactive simulators and pluralist macroeconomics

Partly due to the long-standing cry from within the profession for less ‘chalk and talk’ and more active learning, and partly due to the advent of new technology, the use of digital tools and simulators has significantly increased in economics education. But as Franz Prante, Alessandro Bramucci, Eckhard Hein, and Achim Truger note in their article, ‘Pluralist macroeconomics – an interactive simulator’, “Many [simulators] are not transparent [and] fail to discuss the underlying foundations or the assumptions of the model.” And needless to say, are not pluralistic, mirroring the content of mainstream textbooks. To fill this gap, Prante et al., developed an online and freely accessible macroeconomic simulator to teach undergraduate pluralist macroeconomics. They explain,

“Our simulator proposes models from two different and competing schools of thought, the New Consensus and the post-Keynesian. However, rather than comparing the two theories in isolation, our simulators attempt to show that by changing the assumptions of the introductory three equations New Consensus model, it is possible to arrive at different economic policy suggestions in line with the post-Keynesian tradition. In doing so, we hope to contribute to increasing pluralism in economic education.”

It works, and is a very useful pedagogical tool.

Likewise deserving a place in our growing repertoire of pluralist pedagogy is John T. Harvey’s ‘Post Keynesian modelling and simulation for the classroom’. While Prante et al., write mainly for the introductory course, Harvey intends for the intermediate economics course. He offers a hands-on, Excel-based, pluralist macroeconomics computer simulation emphasising dynamic analysis, the importance of time, endogenous change, debt, the possibility of financial crisis, automatic stabilisers versus a job guarantee, and a whole lot more. His paper offers a step-by-step instruction to understand how our economy really works. The simulation model can be tweaked to make it more or less complicated/inclusive. Harvey writes,

“The adage holds true: ‘Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn. This simulation exercise is an ideal opportunity to do just that, and with a concept that is difficult to convey with traditional classroom tools. I believe that this exercise leaves a lasting impression on students and enables what psychologists call their remember-to-know shift

regarding the instability of the capitalist system. It will become for them not something they memorize for the final exam, but a part of their general body of knowledge about how the world around them works.”

4 The teaching commons

Even though I have been teaching for 30 years (yikes!), I still get apprehensively nervous my first day, wanting to make a good first impression, carefully mulling over what to say and what not to say, knowing that my students will form an opinion of me and the class within the first five minutes. I also debate how to divide the lecture into syllabus stuff and the fun stuff of economics. Daniel A. Underwood (USA) in his article ‘Welcome to macroeconomics!’, exhorts to skip the syllabus and jump right into economics from the opening bell. He shows us how to, and how to get students excited and involved, as I was reading his article. Underwood writes,

“Central to this exercise is that critical thinking is a student-driven inquiry. This article illustrates how this process can be taught, and on the first day of class. It can then be used throughout the term and integrated into empirically and logically based assignments. At the same time, not only can we empower students to use the tools for critical thinking, we can present alternative theories – paradigms – that explain the business cycle. This *should* be the central organizing theme for macroeconomics. I view the higher learning not as an exercise of professorial pontification, but a process of student-driven discovery. Yes, we often assume the role of expert to explain things, like theories of business cycles, but we can and should have students apply those theories and test them using primary sourced empirical data. In so doing we teach ‘autonomous thinking.’ What greater gift can we bestow upon students?”

References

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Notes

- 1 This is Irene's second keynote published in *IJPEE*; her first was (van Staveren, 2011). The other two *IJPEE* published keynotes are: Peterson (2011), and Chester (2017).
- 2 This is *IJPEE*'s second roundtable. Our first was on pluralism (Reardon, 2015) with an important critical commentary by Negru and Negru (2017).