

Changing the world one student at a time? Uncovering subjective understandings of economics instructors' roles

Extended Abstract

“A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.”(Planck 1949)

In the wake of the economic crises, a number of student organisations and researchers came together to highlight the lack of pluralism and heterodox approaches in economics curricula (Söderbaum, 2009; Coyle, 2012; Post-Crash Economics, 2014). The notion of multiple crises thus extends beyond the widely cited social and ecological crises to a crisis in education. The way academic research and teaching is conducted has real life implications through, for example, finding its way into policy. This has been widely illustrated by Clive Spash's writings on the fallacies of cost-benefit analysis in regards to climate change (Spash, 2007) as well as Andy Stirling's writings on dealing with uncertainty (Stirling, 2011). In spite of such conceptual restrictions of economic theory, the majority of economists believe that economics is the most scientific social science (Colander, 2005; Fourcade et.al, 2014). However, as Fourcade et.al, point out, human life is messy and can never be grasped in its full complexity (Fourcade et.al, 2014). Grasping at least some valuable insights requires broadening the analytical framework of economics.

In the words of the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics (ISIPE), “The real world should be brought back into the classroom, as well as debate and a pluralism of theories and methods. Such change will help renew the discipline and ultimately create a space in which solutions to society's problems can be generated¹. As the introductory quote by Max Planck illustrates, such movements are an integral part of bringing about change. However, the students engaged in this, while vocal, represent a minority. In this paper, we therefore argue that the way lecturers see their teaching and interpret their role as facilitators in a university setting is also crucial since they are the ones that instruct the new generation of economists.

Stepping out of the individual behaviour as the central point of reference, we turn to teaching itself as our basic unit of analysis and look at it through the lens of theories of social practices. In

¹ <http://www.isipe.net/open-letter/>

Reckwitz's (2002) terms, a given practice depends on the connectedness of various ingredients, i.e. "forms of bodily activities, mental activities, things and their use, background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how and notions of competence, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (2002: 249). Consequently, social practices approach practices brings a balanced view on agency and structure, bottom-up and top-down dynamics of change, as well as non-individualistic perception of values, norms and personal commitments, and the co-shaping of human and non-human elements (Spaargaren, 2011). The practices of teaching economics are not only the 'site' of interaction, but they mediate and coproduce systems and structures we live in (Shove & Walker, 2010). We attempt to find potential points of reconfiguration and change towards incorporating pluralism in the relatively stable and predictable practices of teaching economics. To this purpose, we delve into the three ingredients of a given practice, i.e. competence, material and meaning (Shove and Pantzar, 2005), with a particular focus on the latter.

To unravel the role instructors play in co-constructing the change processes in question, we look into the routinized teaching practices via a Q-study with lecturers in introductory macroeconomic courses at the Vienna University of Economics and Business (Wirtschaftsuniversitaet Wien) and the University of Vienna. Q is a mixed method typically employed for studying subjectivity inherent to a given topic around which there is social contestation (Barry and Proops, 1999). Aimed at rendering shared subjective constructions (Cairns, 2013), Q begins with a set of statements that undergo sorting procedure on a relative ranking scale, and finishes with factor-rendering. Through uncovering the framings used by lecturers when teaching economics, the input from Q enables the first step of identifying issues and potential areas for alternating the teaching practices of our interest.

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