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Review of "Innovations in economic education: Promising practices for teachers and students, K-16"

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Henning, M. B. (Ed.) (2017). *Innovations in economic education: Promising practices for teachers and students, K-16*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Have you ever been given the opportunity to rummage around the curriculum files of a long-serving economics educator? I have, twice. You are struck first by how *old* some of the things in the room are—there is yellowed paper that must have been there since at least the 1980s. Look, an actual filmstrip! But if you take a moment to open some of these dusty notebooks, you are struck by how brilliant the content often is. And you may find that an original idea that you had isn't so original after all, having been done decades before. “Why don't we still use this?” is the question that keeps running through my head, or I might find myself wondering if someone should make a 21st-century version of the *Give and Take* (1978) video series.

You can tell that the field of economic education has been blessed from its very beginning with innovative thinkers. That is the first thing that one notices when reading chapter 1 of *Innovations in Economic Education* (Henning, 2017; she is both the author of the first chapter and the editor of the book). Henning begins this important book by rummaging through a thematic/linear history of economic education in the United States, which sets the book's context.

Though she points out economic education's tendency to gravitate toward “chalk and talk” (Becker, Greene, & Rosen, 1990; Becker and Watts, 1996), Henning also uncovers myriad creative projects taken on by economic educators over the past several decades: there have been “high-tech” video tape series, such as the *Adventure Economics Series* (Light, 1975), topic-based case studies such as *Energy/Ecology/Economics* (Campbell, 1980), ongoing simulations/projects such as *Mini-Society* (Kourilsky, 1983), and hands-on curriculum such as *Playful Economics* (Day, 1988; the old storeroom version would probably be entitled *Play-doh Economics*). It is almost as if economics teaching has to constantly rediscover itself. Nevertheless, this necessary innovation is also made possible by several sources of institutional knowledge: the Council for Economic Education, which despite several name changes has been a constant, and educator/researchers such as William Walstad, whose name appears in studies and lesson plans from the 1970s until the present day.

Having been led to meditate on past innovations, the reader is invited to consider some recent ones, which are the subject of each book chapter:



- Thomas Lucey and Duane Giannangelo describe several in-class simulations that can serve as models for expanding students' conceptions of economic citizenship. They argue that these examples of simulations are effective for creating student empathy for different perspectives in economic life.
- James Laney with Amy Willerson discusses several novel approaches for teaching economics through art and art history, while supporting their narrative with research findings. The clear, step-by-step guides provide tools and a model for educators who want find new ways to make their economics instruction interdisciplinary.
- Bonnie Meszaros and Mary Suiter show how to reach preK-age students with economics and personal finance instruction through parents and after-school programs. They give a compendium of classroom-tested economics curriculums from various sources, along with brief useful descriptions.
- Scott Wolla and Sarah Barnett discuss ways to teach economics in the context of middle school math and history. They continue a long-running conversation in economics education about how we can—or whether we should—integrate economics with other subjects.
- Ashley Harrison, J.R. Clark, and Mark C. Schug review the time-honored “Economic Way of Thinking,” along with its importance, current usage, and ways to measure knowledge of it. The discussion reminds us that assessment should not just be an afterthought to the development of new instructional materials, but that assessment goals should be well-conceived from the very beginning of instructional planning.
- Tawni Hunt Ferrarini proffers a rationale, literature review, and compendium of tools for the use of technology with economics teaching. She takes on the difficult task of making use of the latest technology tools, but without falling victim to technology for its own sake—her goal is “to complement traditional methods of instruction, not replace them” (p. 122).
- Mark Bayles, Barbara Flowers, and Eva Johnston explain in detail how teachers can use various high-tech data resources from the Federal Reserve System to teach inquiry-based activities, such as FRED (Federal Reserve Economic Data). Teachers who want to show students the basics of what economists actually do in their research, and how to begin to emulate it, should start here.
- Anand Marri discusses how to teach economics in the context of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework*, which is a central effort of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2013). The C3 Framework leads students to use evidence and sources, along with the disciplinary tools of social studies to explore real-life compelling questions.



- Philip Vanfossen shows how an undergraduate course in economic education can be organized, so as to give beginning teachers a head-start in the discipline. Traditional economics courses in universities are not designed to prepare future teachers for the classroom. Readers of this book who are in higher education would do well to work toward instituting such a course at their own college or university.

Exactly what is innovative about these chapters? In a sense, some of them are actually backward looking. For example, Laney and Willerson's chapter notes explicitly that it is a compilation of a couple decades of the authors' own research. Similarly, the Economic Way of Thinking itself is not new. Rather, it is something that anyone with a cursory knowledge of economic education will be very familiar with.

The innovation is in the presentation. The chapters are curated in such a way that they address the current questions and needs of educators. For example, the need for pre-K education is a question that has political currency, and even if the particular teaching materials in the chapter are not brand-new, the organization and presentation of them is. This may be of crucial importance if, say, a state council for economic education is called upon by local politicians to speak to its readiness to address pre-K education. Similarly, a teacher who wants to teach economics through art may want to access a set of research studies and lesson ideas. Rather than having to start from scratch, she will now have a useful, research-backed framework for doing so. Even lessons and teaching ideas that have been around for a while need updating and re-framing to address contemporary needs. The chapters are well-chosen to speak to these needs, making the book an important contribution in the practical user's history of economic education.

Of course, there are aspects of the book that do deal with things that are completely new. A clear example of this would be Ferrarini's chapter on technology; educational technology moves so quickly that any discussion of it must include the cutting-edge tools. And the C3 Framework represents a new direction for NCSS, so any discussion of economics' place in it is necessarily innovative.

What constitutes a useful innovation? There is a danger that creative thinkers can re-tread past mistakes, or simply fail to take hold of useful ideas that are already in print. But there is also a danger that instructional methods become ossified, with educators constantly insisting that the way they currently do it is the best way. A useful innovation avoids both errors. For instance, a teacher who may have casually opened the FRED database may become quickly intimidated by the



surfeit of information available in it and conclude that “this is too high for my students’ developmental level.” The teacher may talk himself out of using a resource that his students can in fact use. Bayles, Flowers, and Johnson’s chapter would disabuse the teacher of that notion by showing several activities that would be accessible to all kinds of students, and which the teacher could use in the contemporary educational climate. Part of that climate might be the need for inquiry-based education, in which case Marri’s chapter on the C3 Framework would provide philosophical and pedagogical guidance for how to use the Fed’s materials.

Innovations in Economic Education is a book that leverages the rich past and the coherence of economic education, yet moves to address the needs of the present and future. Not all social studies disciplines can claim the level of cooperation and coherence that economic education can—Henning has done well to make use of it in situating the material at hand in such a way that it is useful for the contemporary educator. *Innovations in Economic Education* is its own signpost in the history of our discipline, a testament to the ongoing creativity of a powerful educational community.

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