

Transformative Economics Education: using proverbs from around the world in the classroom

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Introduction

I propose an approach to Economics education based on transformative learning theory and Roger's humanistic approach. The aim is to make the study of Economics more related to the students' lives, enhancing their motivation to engage with Economics material. I propose the use of proverbs from around the world as a way of challenging students' meaning perspectives, and describe my experience of using this approach in the classroom.

A critique of Economics as it is currently taught

Economics is usually described in modern textbooks as the science which studies how people choose to use scarce resources in attempting to satisfy their unlimited wants (see for example Sloman (2003)). It is remarkable how quickly the implications for pedagogy follow from this definition:

- Economics is taught as a science, using formulae and mathematical optimization problems. Most economists look to the natural sciences as a model for economics, admiring them for their precision, their ability to formulate testable hypothesis, and their ability to measure the objects of their study. This approach clearly has merits, but it results in a teacher-centred approach, where we essentially tell students that economics is about solving problems of constrained optimization, rather than a student-centred one, where we ask the students what they find meaningful in the study of Economics.
- People's unlimited wants, or "preferences", are taken as given, and the emphasis is entirely on allocating resources efficiently for a given set of preferences. Economists do not study what determines people's wants – that's the job of psychologists. As a consequence, we do not encourage students to seek to understand what determines their desires, nor to question the validity of these desires. Another consequence is that, when we teach economics, we exclude any

bridge with other disciplines, in particular with other social sciences and with ethics. This understanding of man is inconsistent with reality: people do not have a little economics box in their heads which works in isolation from all their other faculties. We implicitly teach our students an anthropology that is clearly inconsistent with reality.

Things are slowly changing, however. For example, in 2002 the psychologist Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel prize in Economics for his work in prospect theory, and in 1998 the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen won the Nobel prize in Economics for his work on welfare economics. However, in spite of the popularity of Sen's work, "only a handful of economics departments offer courses specifically on ethics" (Wight, 2009). These innovations are making a welcome appearance at a time when the economics profession is becoming increasingly aware of its need to motivate students. For example, in a recent newsletter, the UK's Economics Network, a teaching and learning centre of the Higher Education Academy, reported that two thirds of economics lecturers regard motivating students as an issue of concern (Economics Network (2009)).

This lack of motivation has, in my opinion, as its root cause the fact that Economics does not relate sufficiently to the lives of students, and so fails to inspire them. There are two, related determinants of this lack of relevance. The first concerns our understanding of the purpose of higher education. Many educators believe that Economics education is about equipping students with the skills to work; I agree that this is an important goal, but I don't think it meets the deeper aspirations of students. The second is that Economics higher education is often conceived as a market, where consumers (students) and suppliers (teachers) meet to exchange a product (education) for cash. One of the negative features of markets is that they tend to deny the importance of relationships: as long as the product is of good quality, the argument goes, relationships do not matter. Yet my experience of teaching and that of my colleagues is that education comes alive when students and teachers establish a relationship with each other which leads to mutual development.

Gibbs (2001)'s views on these matters coincide with mine. Gibbs produces an excellent critique of the "marketization" of higher education, and then goes on to suggest what higher education should be about. Quoting Paterson(1996), Gibbs believes that the aim of higher education is to "help people appreciate what is significant and worthwhile in life and develop fully as persons in their own right" (*ibid.*, p.86). Like Coillier (1998), Gibbs believes that "higher education institutions have failed to grasp their responsibility... [which is] to provide opportunities for students to confront their inner motives and real values... (p. 91). This can only be achieved through deep, authentic learning developed through existential responses to issues". This in turn is achieved in an environment of mutual trust, of

conversation between staff and students, who feel comfortable enough to expose their vulnerabilities, and who in so doing form a community.

This vision of the purpose of higher education is consistent with two, closely related schools of pedagogy: transformative learning theory and the humanistic school. Below, I offer a basic description of these two theoretical frameworks. I then apply them to Economics education; specifically, I show how using proverbs from around the world can be used to teach economics with these two approaches in mind.

A brief introduction to transformative learning theory and Roger's humanistic approach

In transformative learning theory, the most well-known figure is Jack Mezirow. For Mezirow, the purpose of education is “to help the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purpose rather than uncritically acting on those of others”¹ (Mezirow 1997, quoted in Taylor(1998) p.12). We tend to form meaning perspectives largely uncritically, accepting them from those in authority, as in childhood.

As Taylor (1998 p.7) explains, “when a radically different and incongruent experience cannot be assimilated into the meaning perspective, it is either rejected or the meaning perspective is transformed”, in a developmental process of meaning which continues throughout one's someone's life. Such experiences are known as disorienting dilemmas, for example the death of a dear family member. They can also take less traumatic forms, when we experience a conflict between our thoughts, feelings and actions. These experiences come with a very shining silver lining in that they compel an individual to re-examine the assumptions behind his or her meaning perspectives.

In the classroom, the teacher can in a sense replicate these events (on a much lesser scale of course) by disrupting a student' world view and generate in the student doubt about interpretations of events which the student had taken for granted to be true. Through critical reflection, students can then become aware of the “uncritically assimilated half-truths of conventional wisdom and power relationships . . . [and] come to recognize being caught in his/her own history and reliving it” (Mezirow 1981, quoted in Taylor(1998) p.8). To do so is, for Mezirow, the educator's primary role².

¹ A number of authors believe that transformative learning ultimately leads students not to more individual autonomy as envisaged by Mezirow, but rather to a sense of interdependent, compassionate relationship with the rest of society (Scott (1991, see Taylor (1998)) and to “serve causes [...] much greater than ourselves” (Zohar and Marshall (2004)).

² For Boyd, the subconscious, by its very nature, eludes the conscious and hence logic, putting a severe limit on Mezirow's exclusively reason-based approach (see Taylor (1998) pp. 13-15). Instead, transformation is captured by Carl Jung's idea of individuation.

Roger's humanistic approach substantially overlaps with transformative learning, and has important implications for economics education. On the basis of his experience as a psychotherapist, which indicated to him that the client usually knows better how to proceed than the therapist, Rogers suggests that the teacher take a step back and allows the student a very large degree of initiative in deciding what to learn and how to learn it.

Teachers are co-learners with the students, and catalyse the students to become effective learners. Central to his approach are the notions of relationship and trust: "human beings become increasingly trustworthy once they feel at a deep level that their subjective experience is both respected and progressively understood" (Rogers (1992), in www.infed.org). The educator should establish a direct personal encounter with the learner, meeting her on a person-to-person basis. This enables both the educator and the students to be who they truly are, without masks and fears. This in turn generates a sense of freedom and affirmation of one's self, motivating students to discover, i.e. to draw in from the outside, and to fuse their discovery with their sense of self.

An application of transformative learning and the humanistic approach using proverbs from around the world

Transformative learning theory has as its departure point that people, particularly when young, tend to learn uncritically, i.e. without questioning the meaning perspective of educators. This is what happens in economics education, where we, the educators, implicitly tell the students that the goal of economics is to maximize efficiency. This is particularly true in mainstream microeconomics, which is about maximizing utility given preferences. But should this be the goal of economics? Should we not, at university level, invite the students to question what the goals of Economics should be, and to make up their own minds?

Both transformative learning theory and the humanistic approach advocate the use of provocative, thought-stimulating material which will induce the student to question the validity of his or her views. Proverbs from around the world can serve this purpose. When teaching Comparative Economic Development, a third year undergraduate module, I provide students with a list of proverbs about wealth from around the world taken from Prentice-Hall Encyclopaedia of World Proverbs (1986). This lists all proverbs containing the term 'wealth', giving about forty proverbs. This exercise is designed to get the students to question their attitude towards wealth.

Some proverbs portray wealth in a positive light, e.g. "If there is wealth, there is joy"; others portray it negatively, e.g. "A man's wealth is his enemy". A lot of these proverbs are stimulating for students in that they raise issues about wealth which the students had not debated in economics seminars. For example, the proverb

“When you have wealth and fame, even strangers gather round; in times of poverty and lowliness, even relatives depart from you” raises the important issue of how wealth affects relationships with people.

I ask students to tell me how many proverbs are positive about wealth (i.e. portray it in a good light), and how many are negative. They conclude that the negatives outnumber the positives. Essentially popular wisdom across cultures raises alarm bells with respect to wealth. Students find this striking in that it contradicts the mainstream view in economics that “more wealth is good”, to which they had been exposed elsewhere (including in other lectures). What I find is that many of us (that is the students and I) display a contradictory attitude towards wealth, recognizing that money won’t buy happiness, yet seeking it intensely.

Roger’s humanistic theory encourages educators to give students the freedom to select their own study material; in the context of proverbs, students can be asked to select the proverbs which they regard as most meaningful - the ones which have struck them most. The notion of being struck refers to an interior recognition of a truth, which can take place at the level of the subconscious, thus transcending the use of rationality alone in Economics classes. Of course, students can be asked, indeed should be asked, to reflect rationally on why a particular proverb struck them. Notice also the important role of trust in the whole exercise, in so far as the educator is saying to the student “what struck you is important for you, I accept it and value it in so far as it is important for you; go ahead and explore it further”.

Presenting proverbs from different parts of the world has the added advantage that it makes education truly multicultural, in harmony with our times of globalization. More importantly, this approach can help the students to feel included, by incorporating in the syllabus relevant material from their cultures. Cultural diversity in the curriculum can lead to a transformation of meaning perspectives, in so far as at university a person may for the first time engage in deep multicultural comparisons. Thomas (2002 p.439) reports a student saying “Coming here was the biggest shock of my life. It was a great learning experience. It was like an awakening”.

Conclusion

Student-centred learning in general, and in particular transformative learning and the humanistic approach, are still largely not practised in Economics education. The scope of their application is, I feel, vast. In this article, I hope to have persuaded the reader that proverbs from around the world can be profitably used to invite students to question their views about fundamental economics issues such as their relationship with wealth. This questioning can lead to a change in students’ meaning perspectives, or a confirmation. In either case, the student will have deepened his or her awareness of how he or she relates to the issue at stake.

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