

Do students wish to incorporate genuine
sociality in the economics syllabus?
Evidence from Italy and the UK

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The literature on genuine sociality

- There is a “huge empirical evidence that genuine, not instrumental, or intrinsically motivated sociality, is one of the heaviest components of subjective well-being” (Bruni and Stanca, 2008); e.g.:
 - Volunteers are more satisfied than non-volunteers (Meier and Stutzer, 2004)
 - The quality, not the quantity, of relationships improves well-being (Nezlek, 2000)

Pedagogical approach

- Main focus: correction of standard textbook assumption that people are entirely selfish
 - Example in Italy: Becchetti, Bruni and Zamagni (2010) 'Microeconomics' textbook
- This 'antropological assumption' may result in students becoming disengaged, whether consciously or subconsciously
- Allowing the students a degree of influence in deciding what is in the syllabus
 - Limited literature, e.g. it may well lead to increased student engagement, which is linked to increased student performance (Crawford et al, 1999)

Methodology

- Questionnaire distributed to students in Italy (universities of Verona and Padova, n=465) and the UK (London Metropolitan University, n=136)
- Questionnaire given to year 2 and 3 undergraduate students
- Questionnaire piloted in UK (n=20)
- Questionnaire split into 4 parts;
 1. Students' attitude towards the current syllabus and towards issues relating to genuine sociality
 2. Students' attitude towards ideas and findings from the recent literature on altruism, reciprocity, CSR, etc.
 3. Students' attitude towards broadening the syllabus to include specific activities designed to promote generosity
 4. Students' overall attitude towards broadening the syllabus to (a) include recent ideas and findings as above, and (b) incorporate activities designed to promote generosity

Methodology

- Most questions involved the answers “I strongly agree” (=1), “I agree” (=2)...“I strongly disagree” (=5)
- Questionnaire allows space for qualitative response to each question, important as research is of an exploratory nature and researchers are likely to miss some important points for students

Students' attitude towards the current syllabus and towards issues relating to genuine sociality

- “I find the syllabus as it is taught at present useful and relevant to my needs”: 1.76 in Italy, 2.14 in UK
- “I enjoy studying economics”: 1.86 in Italy, 1.72 in UK
- Students show most agreement with:
 - “Moral hazard, free-riding, shirking and other problems cannot be solved by means of material incentives and rules alone, but require ethical behaviour on the part of agents such as honesty and integrity”: 2.04 in Italy, 2.17 in UK
 - “Pharmaceutical firms ought to sell drugs to poor people at reduced prices (i.e. prices which are not profit-maximizing)”: 2.22 in Italy, 2.12 in UK
- Students most in disagreement with:
 - “I believe that firms have the right to fire workers so as to maximize profits, even if they are not in danger of going bankrupt”: 3.74 in Italy, 3.34 in the UK
 - “In the current economics syllabus, we pay too much attention to materialistic desires, encouraging egoism and ultimately generating frustration rather than fulfillment”: 3.45 in Italy – but 2.82 in UK ($p=0.04$)

Students' attitude towards incorporating new material related to genuine sociality in the syllabus

- Average in this section: 2.62 in Italy, 2.39 in UK
- Students show most agreement with:
 - “Recent evidence suggests that firms that have social objectives in addition to profits tend to display a higher productivity and a higher social return than firms that focus entirely on profits, they also tend to display lower profits. I think that this and other similar findings should be included in the economics syllabus”: 1.97 in Italy, 2.15 in the UK
 - “The recession which began in 2007 has highlighted the duration of short term institutions (e.g. some investment banks). I think that this and other similar findings should be included in the syllabus”: 2 in Italy, 1.95 in UK

Students' attitude towards incorporating new material related to genuine sociality in the syllabus

- Students show most disagreement with:
 - “There is evidence showing that students of economics are more selfish than students of other disciplines. This is a source of concern for me”: 3.59 in Italy, 3.03 in the UK
 - “Economists and psychologists studying happiness have found that practicing a religion significantly and positively affects happiness, for example by acting as a shock absorbing device in times of difficulty (e.g. while unemployed). I think that research of this kind should be included in the economics syllabus”: 3.53 in Italy, 2.78 in the UK
- Students indicate that, if time is an issue, the discussion of monopoly/oligopoly should be shortened.

Students' attitude towards specific activities designed to promote generosity

- “The promotion of generosity can help to reduce market failure. For example, a generous monopolist may well choose not to raise the price of his good above the competitive level; or, companies that are concerned with the help of the population are likely to pollute less, etc. I believe that this is a valid argument in favour of promoting generosity in the population in general and in the classroom in particular”: 2.65 in Italy, 2.24 in the UK
- “I believe that economics education should promote in students virtues such as frugality and sobriety with a view to attaining sustainable economic growth” (can be interpreted as generosity towards future generations): 2.71 in Italy, 2.23 in the UK
- Students indicate the following as preferred activities to promote generosity in the classroom:
 - Providing students with space to plan their own business including businesses with social objectives
 - Presenting students with case studies of companies which failed as a result of managers and other stakeholders (e.g. workers) pursuing their self-interest alone

Students' attitudes overall:

- “I would like the economics syllabus to be broadened to include research about altruistic behaviour”: 2.71 in Italy, 2.39 in the UK (both significantly different from 3, $p < 0.001$)
- “I would like the economics syllabus to be broadened to include activities designed to promote altruistic behaviour”: 2.73 in Italy, 2.47 in the UK (both significantly different from 3, $p < 0.001$)

Ordered probit analysis of students' overall attitudes

	Include material	Include activities
Current syllabus useful	-0.14*	-0.07
Year of study	-0.15	-0.25*
Age	-0.07***	-0.02
Gender	0.21*	-0.02
Student works	0.13	-0.23*
Religion (yes/no)		-0.04**
Italian student	0.23*	0.26

Both regressions significant at $p < 0.001$ level

Religion in “include material” breaks assumption of equidistant steps, generalised probit estimation shows it is significant in 2 out of 4 steps

Analysis of “I find economics classes more inspiring when we account for the altruistic aspects of human nature.” (q1.6)

	Q1.6
Current syllabus useful	(not significant)
Year of study	-0.03
Age	-0.00
Gender	0.13
Student works	-30**
Religion (yes/no)	-0.15
Italian student	0.49***

Conclusion

- In general, economics students show modest support for introducing in the syllabus material from the literature on genuine sociality and activities designed to promote generosity
- Older, female and British students are more likely to want to include this literature; final year students and those practicing a religion are more likely to want to introduce activities to promote generous behaviour
- Older and British students are more likely to find economics education more inspiring as a result of taking into account the altruistic aspects of human nature