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# Performing Economics: A Critique of 'Teaching and Learning'\*



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## Abstract

Economics students find difficulty in developing effective learning strategies; they would also welcome and benefit from a more pluralistic teaching of economics. Nevertheless, economics teaching has become less pluralistic over the recent past. Recent benchmark statements seem content to underwrite an essentially monist approach to the discipline in the hope that a deepening crisis in economics teaching can be averted by expanding teaching and learning programmes taking the content of teaching as given and instead concentrating on presentational reform. The paper argues that such teaching and learning strategies are part of the problem rather than its solution.

## Introduction

There has been a tendency in recent years towards the methodologising of economics teaching. By this we mean a tendency to consider the teaching process as a purely presentational issue, so that the *how* of teaching economics is treated in abstraction from the question as to *what* should be taught. This is driven in part by the process of quality assurance and partly by the perception that economics is an inherently difficult subject to teach. In addition the focus on teaching has arisen from a previous and equally one-sided focus on 'research' in isolation from, and often at the expense of, 'teaching'.

The result of this one-sidedness is the abstraction of 'teaching' from content, and the introduction of dedicated teaching 'experts' and of bureaucratic promotion pathways in teaching. This has led to initiatives that favour 'innovation' in teaching, and to a process by which the separation of the *how* and the *what* of economics teaching becomes institutionally embedded in universities; for, while delivery of

content is considered problematic, requiring those innovations alluded to above, this by default presents the content as if it is not in itself a problem and, thence, as a fixed, dehistoricised model.

We agree that there are problems in economics teaching. Economics students do find it difficult to develop effective learning strategies. But this is not because economics is an inherently difficult discipline to grasp. Rather the difficulties are of its own making: the *form* that economics now takes in many universities *makes* it a difficult discipline to grasp. Just as economists and games theorists, brought in to construct markets, auctions and the like, have *created* the kind of behaviour that they begin by positing as natural – a phenomenon that the economic sociologist, Callon (1998), calls 'performing the market' – so recent developments in academic economics have created, or 'performed', the kind of behaviour on the part of academic staff and students that the resources thrown into 'teaching and learning' (T&L) research and practice seek to rectify. In this way contemporary economics teaching is performing its own difficulty.

The focus on teaching methodology tends to hypostatise the content of teaching and the curriculum. The more the focus on teaching methodology, the ever less is teaching content considered seriously. We argue that the modern economics malaise has indeed been *performed* by the wilful narrowing of content and the standardising of the economic canon at the expense of heterodoxy and the history of ideas. The problem at root is that economic principles are taught with little or no regard for the theoretical controversies, disputes and social context from which they emerge. There is an increasing use of textbooks at higher levels of the curriculum. These textbooks set out models with limited social/historical content. In this way they limit a proper understanding and development of the curriculum. The introductory textbook performs the idea of a model for which the essential problem is content-*delivery* rather than content-*development*. As a viable alternative we will show through our own experience how quite diverse content can be added to the curriculum in a way that interests students while also introducing them to a broader understanding of their discipline in its social context and as part of a historical development. In this way, we believe, economic principles come alive.

We are not against the principles that routinely dominate undergraduate courses, nor do we want to substitute for them principles of our own choosing. Nor are we against innovation in teaching method *per se*. Indeed, experimental economics provides a nice example of how development in the content of what is being taught can drive the development of teaching method. It should also be noted that experimental economics for the most part does not present or base itself on alternative principles to the mainstream but rather explores those principles in a

new way. But experimental economics is a special case. Most options offered to undergraduates do not carry within them their own innovations in teaching technique; nor do they explore the theoretical basis of the standard compulsory elements of the economics student's programme. Rather, that same theoretical basis is merely applied to new areas (so, for example, microeconomics becomes labour economics, managerial economics or health economics) or applied to old areas in more depth (so, for example, macro and micro become monetary economics). We should be clear, also, that for us the problem is not one of too much abstraction and too little reality. Economics, like other sciences – indeed, like other theoretical discourses – just is abstract, and we and the students had better get used to it. But abstract discourses do not have to be unreal. Economic abstractions have origins, contexts of discovery and actual relations to other principled discourses, none of which, however, is made any more apparent by rolling those economic principles out over simulated 'real-world' situations/problems, as the standard macro or micro textbook is inclined to do.

Economic principles do not have to be unreal. But, starved of immanent narrative and relation to alternative perspectives, principles are *made* unreal. Economic principles become news from nowhere – what we call Monecon – and, for reasons we explore below, it is Monecon that economics teaching has become. In referring to Monecon, then, we do not mean just orthodox neoclassical economics but rather what happens to any orthodoxy when reasonable means of reflecting on its status have been excluded. Once deprived of the immanent narrative with which to make sense of their chosen discipline, staff and students are left with no other option than to fall back on extraneous T&L (usually technologically-driven) resources so as to bring a subject, deadened by lack of intra- and inter-disciplinary context, back to life. But this Lazarus refuses to rise. Students are taught to expect easy (if still unconvincing) answers from their tutors, to the extent that the border between original and plagiarised work becomes increasingly difficult (and expensive) to police, and staff are taught to deliver on this. What should be the student's responsibility to partake of an undergraduate economics education becomes the responsibility of the tutor to provide the wherewithal for satisfactory grades. And what should be the tutor's responsibility, viz., to provide a cogent (i.e. historically-literate) theoretical framework within which an engaged student can pursue his or her own evolving disciplinary interests, turns into the imperative to hit institutionally determined (and increasingly T&L informed) pass-rate targets.

Using a Frey-inspired distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, we will argue that problems in economics teaching admit a moral rather than technical solution. It is not that there is no room for improvement in means of delivery. But until it is recognised that the problem is essentially one of morale – a problem that

is linked to the hollowing-out of the syllabus in historical and inter-disciplinary terms – then no amount of T&L can of itself rectify matters. Indeed, of itself, it can only make matters worse. It demoralises staff, who are persuaded that responsibility for 'good' teaching lies outside of themselves and their own research interests, and it demoralises students, who likewise lose responsibility as the educational process resolves itself into the (content-abstracted) problem of delivery.

### The T&L turn in economics

According to *The Handbook for Economics Lecturers* 'many students of economics, including those specialising in the subject at single or joint honours level, experience difficulty with the method of economics, particularly in relating abstract concepts, diagrams and models to real-world economic issues and problems' (Forsythe, 2002). At the heart of this 'difficulty', it is claimed, lies the issue of delivery. For many, an answer might be found in the use of technological aids like the internet, alongside, or as a way of enhancing, an essentially traditional 'talk and chalk' format. More usually, however, more radical changes are proposed, in which traditional methods are overthrown in favour of problem-based learning (PBL). At the Economics Network Site, PBL is posed as an alternative to the 'limitations of the traditional lecture–seminar (TLS) format' (Forsythe, 2002). 'With lectures', so the story goes, 'the emphasis is on *giving information* rather than *learning* – lectures represent what teachers do and not necessarily what students need. Although most lecturers can "talk" a good syllabus, the real teaching challenge is to ensure that most students are not lost in the process [for] it is all too easy for the traditionally organised seminar to fall far short of the ideal, in which there is healthy teacher–student and student–student interaction, and come dangerously close to being a teacher-dominated environment in which students are spoon-fed. The learning environment becomes a struggle for both teacher (students will not talk) and students (classes are boring)' (Forsythe, 2002). Again, 'students who, for whatever reason, are content to adopt a passive rather than an active role in the learning process are difficult to motivate within a TLS environment. Such a regime may do little to develop confidence and independent learning skills in students who need help in these respects, or to stimulate those who become disinterested. Indeed, the traditional lecture–seminar format can actually *alienate* such students from the learning process rather than *embracing* them within it' (Forsythe, 2002). We just note in passing that TLS is taken for granted as failing. No mention, here, that the problem might be curriculum-based.

Now consider how the *Handbook* deals with reforming the actual conduct of teaching:

When designing tasks, the aim is to make students primarily responsible for acquiring and assimilating the information necessary to solve them. In a PBL

environment the teacher relinquishes the role of 'expert' and assumes the role of facilitator. Student learners must adapt to a learning environment in which there is no 'expert' information source (Forsythe, 2002).

Though originating within a health-care context in the 1960s, problem-based learning is now applied in many disciplines and, as the *Handbook* makes clear, has now embedded itself in higher education economics teaching. Again, in passing, we note that little consideration seems to have been given to the possibility that different disciplines may be intrinsically characterised by different forms of learning and learner; that medical or more generally health-care training requires (ideally) a different form of trainee–trainer relationship than does, say, the inculcation and development of economic principle. In any case, before we discuss teaching methods, we should first recognise that there is always a specific content at stake. As Colander points out, teaching in higher education may be following the now-discredited path taken in the training of school teachers in the US, where, 'until a recent backlash, the educational focus was so strongly focused on technology and delivery that it lost contact with content. In some education schools, you did not need to major in math to teach math, but you had to study a whole variety of teaching methods courses' (Colander, 2004). Or, again, were one to take seriously the innovations taking place in the content of economics itself, then, as Becker notes, we would not need to cast around for extraneous teaching formats: there are already 'active learning techniques made available by experimental economics, games and simulations ... we need to bring the innovations in the science of economics into our teaching of economics' (Becker, 2004). We should point out: Colander and Becker are by no means unsympathetic to the reform of the teaching process in economics. But, the 'focus on teaching *methods* rather than on *content* ... makes it easier for other economists to dismiss research on economics education, and not see it as an integral part of general economics research' (Colander, 2004; our emphasis).

### The critics' response

It would be foolish to rule out *a priori* the possibility of enhancing the student's learning experience through the judicious use of internet, video, experiment and the like, or at least the exploring of that possibility. And, in any case, there is more than one kind of student learning experience at stake here. The needs of the full-time student are not exactly those of the part-timer, the needs of the campus student not those of the distance learner (see Oattes, 1990). But still, the fact remains: the assumption that animates most of the T&L discussion and development is that undergraduate economics just is difficult: so students have 'difficulty with the method of economics', difficulty with its 'abstract concepts', and difficulty relating these 'abstract concepts' to 'real-world economic issues and problems' (Forsythe,

2002) – as though economics just is a bunch of 'abstract' concepts and a method for playing around with them. Now there is a *kind* of economics that fits the bill: economic principles courses, the ubiquitous 'macro' and 'micro'. But not so long ago, such courses were in themselves less abstract than they are now and, in any case, were counterbalanced by compulsory courses in the history of ideas, in philosophy and method also, courses that would provide historical and inter-disciplinary context for the 'principles' classes. Essentially, the contextual component of an undergraduate economics programme would somehow try to make explicit the origins of modern economic principles, and their relation to other ways of looking at individual and society. Naturally enough, exactly how economic principles were contextualised depended on the institution concerned, and that in turn depended on the interests and expertise of staff: here, maybe, a course in social philosophy; there, a series of sociology classes. There would also be significant variation across institutions as to what constitutes 'economic principles': some emphasising, say, the Austrian contribution; others putting an institutionalist perspective alongside the more familiar Hicksian version of microeconomics. Now, though, standardisation in the form of the benchmarking system has made the latter kind of variation all but impossible (Becker, 2004). Meanwhile, the customer imperative of 'student choice' has made 'contextualising' classes optional (and thereby in many cases unviable). At some time in the recent past, it became impossible for the people that made up a typical economics department to deliver the kind of economics degree that their collective interests, expertise and judgement warranted and instead they began to deliver something else: what we call Monecon. Monecon is economics drifting into dogma – in the sense that economic principle becomes news from nowhere, and no wonder students are finding it hard going.

In the face of the now deeply embedded monist culture in economics academe, the Association for Heterodox Economics seems to recognise that no amount of T&L tweaking can save the day, calling instead for a root-and-branch reworking of the curriculum, for 'faced with a [Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)] benchmark less critical of its prescriptions than theology and which attaches less importance to diversity than accountancy, it is hard to accept that iterative reform is a practical procedure' (AHE, 2007: 5). Instead, the AHE advocates a return to the kind of pluralism that was common enough not so long ago. At the very least, history of ideas courses should be restored, and as a compulsory element in the programme of studies. As they make clear, this is hardly special pleading on the part of heterodox economists and the like, but rather serves a number of sound pedagogical purposes, not least of which is the ability to *judge*: '[j]udgement consists in choice: in recognising why one explanation of the phenomena is superior to another; why one line of reasoning leads to false results and another to valid results, why in the light of evidence this, and not that, explanation should be

preferred' (AHE, 2007: 8, see also 2).

Now while it is true that the QAA economics benchmarking statement recognises that '[i]ts subject matter engages with other subject areas such as psychology, politics, sociology, anthropology, geography, history and law' (QAA, 2007: 1), it is equally clear that Monecon does not so engage; and at the same time, with the proliferation in many institutions of compulsory 'higher education orientation' modules, 'employability' modules and the like, with the emphasis on language studies as part of a student's programme, it is becoming more, not less, difficult to choose to explore such an 'engagement' outside of their core modules. In any case, it is disingenuous of those responsible for the benchmarking statement to talk in such terms, when they know full well that economics students are actively discouraged from exploring interdisciplinary connections. For one thing the student-numbers game means that the financial gain of a student choosing, say, a sociology module means a financial loss for labour economics or econometrics. Moreover, the contemporary economics undergraduate is hardly encouraged to see her discipline as part of a richer social-science story, as economics department after economics department finds itself absorbed into the ubiquitous business-school framework. And, again, apropos the question of judgement: the QAA says that a single honours degree student 'should appreciate the existence of different methodological approaches' (QAA benchmarking statement, p.2). But how are students to come by this 'appreciation', when methodology modules, like other core contextualising elements of the traditional economics degree, have all but disappeared?

The AHE wants to emphasise the debatable (but not actually debated) truth-value aspect of the Monecon programme and also the effect that this has on the student learning experience: that Monecon cannot help but deliver a partial understanding of things, as well as an under-developed capacity for critical thought on the part of students. Our concern, though, is not whether Monecon is true or false but rather how it works; how it shapes the attitudes and the competences of the staff that have to teach it. Our concern is that economics, in the form that has come to dominate the contemporary university scene, is an engine, not a camera (Mackenzie, 2006; see also Mackenzie and Millo, 2003).

## Informing and performing

Performativity has become a key concept in contemporary economic sociology. Many strands of thought constitute its origin but Austin's notion of the perlocutionary force of an utterance – 'what we bring about or achieve by saying something' (Austin, 1962: 108) – is clearly important. Central to Austin's view is that words (whether spoken or written) can perform as well as *inform*. Our utterances at

a wedding ceremony, for example, do not describe or inform but rather *make* the marriage. Literally: 'With these words, I thee wed.' Callon's economic-sociological take on performativity consists in the idea that economics, as a body of text, 'performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions' (Callon, 1998: 2). Or again: '[The] economy is embedded not in society but in economics' (1998: 30). 'Yes, *homo economicus* does exist, but is not an a-historical reality; he does not describe the hidden nature of the human being. He is the result of a process of configuration' (1998: 22). This being the case then, sociological studies should be trying to generate 'not a more complex *homo economicus* but the comprehension of his simplicity and poverty' (1998: 50).

Callon's point is that *Homo economicus* learns from economics and begins to affect the behaviour that economics takes as axiomatic. But what then do economics academics learn from recent developments within the discipline? First, they learn from the rise of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) that teaching and research are quite separate activities and that research is everything and teaching is nothing (see Colander, 2004). Homogeneity 'might be seen as a good thing: it could be taken as an indicator of a mature subject that has settled a number of big questions and agreed a basis for theorising. It might make it easier for students to transfer from one institution to another in the course of their degree. However, it might also be seen as problematic for the future health of the subject'. For, as the statement continues: 'it might reflect inertia in relation to teaching whereby sunk capital in teaching a received body of theory and low professional returns to innovation in teaching compared with professional returns from research generate very weak incentives for diversity' (AHE, 2008). There is then, nothing natural in the apparent sterility of economics teaching, pre T&L. Rather that sterility is being *performed*, and part of that performance, we will argue, is the re-definition of economics as a decontextualised, monist discipline. The targeting of research, in the form of the RAE, made a more liberal, pluralistic approach to the provision of undergraduate economics seem to many in the academy a luxury that could no longer be afforded. Additional research time had to be found from somewhere, and a streamlining and retrenchment of programmes around (mainstream) core economic principles was almost inevitable, given that there had always been those who had objected in principle to what they saw as the dilution of hard-core scientific economics with approaches that somehow presented a more fluid and contestable view of that science.

For writers such as Callon (1998), Mackenzie (2006) and Mackenzie and Millo (2003), performativity is a matter of *techné*, a process whereby actors are effectively enabled or disabled in what they do. This has undoubtedly been the case in economics departments in recent years, as Monecon has shaped, 'performed', the competences of those that engage with it. The monist turn in economics academe has effectively

de-skilled the academic and rendered them incapable of doing their job, *as traditionally conceived*, as leading a process in which the subject actually advances through a decentralised curriculum development and its engagement with a student body. The 'frozen state of current thinking', as the AHE response to the recent benchmark statement puts it (p.2), is in large measure the result of a handing down of the curriculum to 'teachers', including recommended textbooks, ready to be dispensed to the (supposedly) acquiescent student. This effective redeployment of the academic from properly innovative academic work, centred on what is (literally) a recognition by that academic of what *they* take to be the seminal texts and positions in the sub-discipline concerned, to the role of dispenser of (someone else's) knowledge, is taken a stage further in some T&L 'problem-based' circles, in which the academic is supposed to become 'facilitator'. It is not difficult to see here how the real problem of a 'frozen' and essentially tyrannous curriculum has been displaced to the pseudo-problem of a supposedly outmoded lecture and seminar format and the skills involved become more generic and more transferable at each stage of the process. Properly academic work involves a symbiotic mix of theory innovation *and* adequate presentation. But with a hand-me-down syllabus, the problem becomes one of presentation, and in the final stage of the de-skilling process, ostensibly as a way of dispelling staff and student lethargy, academic expertise is dispensed with altogether, as the erstwhile academic is further redeployed, this time as facilitator, enabling the student to just happen across fundamental economic principles as they go about the business of solving a series of practical problems devised by the T&L specialist. Undoubtedly, T&L is now doing some performing of its own: inducing a further narrowing of the curriculum. But we should stress that the performing of economics as a 'difficult' subject did not originate with T&L but rather has its roots in cutting the 'luxury' of pluralism. However, with Monecon well under way, it was inevitable that T&L would join the party.

But in our view the performativity thesis, as we have applied it to undergraduate teaching, needs to be taken a stage further. The contemporary economics academic is not just de-skilled or disabled by the Monecon engine so much as demoralised by it. Or better: they are deskilled and disabled by the monist turn in economics academe *because* it demoralises, creating a set of expectations about oneself and one's work that re-define teaching as an externally imposed burden, and the realisation of oneself as an academic only through a dissociated form of research. 'Recognising' the teacher, at this late hour in the day, either through more (performance-related) pay or through 'honour' (the teaching fellowship – tied of course to 'teaching-innovation' targets), only serves to reinforce the new moral climate.

In our view, the teaching-and-learning turn in economics, as well as more general developments within higher education, follows the logic described by Frey in *Not*

*Just for the Money.* As Frey explains, textbook-economics forgets that people are capable of 'intrinsic' (non-pecuniary) motivation as well as the 'extrinsic' motivation of pay, and that, more importantly, treating people as though they are only extrinsically motivated may adversely affect their intrinsic motivation, as in the cases he highlights (see Frey, 1997; also Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000). It seems to us that in general terms Frey's critique of the textbook *Homo economicus* and, relatedly, of its strident but erroneous claims regarding the use of incentives has undeniable force. It is also a critique that resonates at the intra-organisational level of the workplace, as in Gresham's law-like fashion, the bad money of ever-more detailed (and onerous) contracts and their associated 'performance-pay' drives out the good of doing a job for its own sake. Yet we will want to question whether the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction that he draws - and his claim that it is possible to correct for the inadequacies of standard theory through a richer, and essentially *ad hoc*, specification of the agent's net benefit function - really gets to the bottom of the matter. After all, the introduction of, or the placing of a more radical emphasis on, a pecuniary rewards system, disturbs the equilibrium of an already-existing moral community. The pecuniary framework is, first of all, a particular kind of moral intervention and it is because of this that its effects can be difficult to grasp within a standard cost benefit approach for which, necessarily, the moral is packed into *ceteris paribus*. It seems to us then that to tell a really convincing story about what is going on here requires in turn a convincing story about the kind of moral competences and capacities that people draw on to make those communities function as they do.

Such a story is part and parcel of the development of classical political economy and its attempt to move beyond Hobbes's palpable failure to recognise the possibility of society as a spontaneous order. As we have pointed out elsewhere (see Wilson and Dixon, 2004; Wilson and Dixon, 2008) both the social psychologist, George Herbert Mead, and the economist, Adam Smith, account for human behaviour (economic as well as non-economic) in terms of a moral competence that leads people to act in conformity with wider expectations of their behaviour, not because one is forced to conform to external standards, but because those expectations become (through what Smith calls 'sympathy') expectations that one has of oneself. Here, these insights apply *a fortiori* to developments within higher education over the past 15 or so years. Certainly in economics, academics have colluded with an increasingly undemocratic and target-driven management in the marginalisation and elimination of 'heterodox' areas of work in the classroom - in the hope of saving their own areas and/or in the hope of gaining additional research relief. But in helping to drive that wedge between teaching and research they have emptied teaching of its intrinsic worth. Teaching has now become the hot potato of academic life - passed around between unwilling hands until finally settling in the laps of

those unable to find refuge in research funding and/or the burgeoning, expensive but ultimately debilitating leviathan of academic management. It is of course the final irony of this process that many of those who now fill the institutional slots opened up by the 'crisis in economics teaching' - are too often those very people who found the traditional academic life difficult to handle. Then it is they who are called upon to streamline syllabi in line with financial and human-resource driven imperatives. As for the teachers themselves, burdened with benchmark-informed syllabi not of their own making, and confronted by students forced to make their own sense of fundamental economic principles by solving a series of practical problems - problems that, one should add, bear no relation to the problems out of which the theory first emerged - their job has become one of meeting externally imposed targets. In a well-run organisation workers do not see a major distinction between their own interests and that of the firm, and the traditional university and polytechnic, in which work was largely self-determined, was the paradigm case in point. But as the social situation changed, as society demanded more graduates for the same level of funding, the academic could no longer be left to their own (collegial) devices, could no longer be trusted. The introduction of more detailed contracts and narrowly defined personal bonuses, however, in pursuit of greater efficiency and external accountability, has driven a wedge between the private and the common good - effectively producing a social-dilemma situation for the individual academic in which the common good (of the organisation) becomes all but unattainable. As many suspect, both inside and outside academe, the system now in place delivers less education, not more. Further, T&L initiatives cannot repair the damage but rather only serve to make matters worse.

T&L cannot help but collude in the narrowing and hollowing out of programmes, cannot help but militate against proper curriculum innovation, cannot help but foster the 'frozen thinking' that worries the AHE. High-tech teaching solutions require a stable problem-base for their financial viability and, further, need to roll themselves out (and thus impose that stable problem-base) over an ever-increasing area of the curriculum. In this topsy-turvy environment the traditional teacher - one who is supposed to *lead* a critical and open engagement with the discipline, a process whereby the discipline comes (and stays) alive for tutor and student alike - is seen as a luxury that can no longer be afforded. This is how a self-styled 'courseware' developer sees it, as reported in Oattes: '[t]eachers are fuzzy; they are not the best source for telling you about how to do something. One day they'll teach the subject very well perhaps, and then the next day they will teach it very well, but differently. If you've got two days instruction you have to be cost-effective. [But] teachers don't do it the same way twice, and using teachers the managers don't know what is being taught. I have to know that each person gets exactly the same training every time' (Oattes, 1990: 13). According to our lights, the 'fuzzy' thinking is on the side of the T&L

theorist rather than the traditional teacher. For whilst, on the one hand, they are being encouraged to adopt a more 'learner-centred', 'interactive' approach, *à la* problem-based learning, on the other they are increasingly pressured into a bullet-point style of delivery, and into providing students (and sometimes other staff too) with their lecture notes (Freen, 2006).

## Economics as problem-based learning

Economics is not *inherently* difficult to teach. But to see this, we first need to be clear about what economics is. It is not a set of abstract principles, and certainly not a form of inquiry that must presuppose a strategically rational account of human behaviour. As our own work has shown, economic inquiry first developed as a systematic body of theory in (pragmatic) response to the plainly counterfactual attempt by Hobbes to explain individual and society in terms of the strategically-rational machinations of egotistical agents. From its beginning, economic theory has been the attempt to rationally (but also fallibly) reconstruct the competences and capabilities that agents must possess if the kind of spontaneous orders in evidence all around us are to be made explicable. Smith and his near contemporaries wanted to explain the spontaneous (and relatively prosperous) order that was eighteenth-century British society and in the process were forced *by these circumstances* to overturn the human mechanics of Hobbes and his acolytes in favour of *Homo economicus* as a sentimental (and therefore moral) subject (see Wilson and Dixon, 2006). Ricardo's work, held up by many as abstract economics exemplified, only begins to make real (and interesting) sense if looked at in the light of his enduring concern that the deadweight-hand of aristocracy and privilege would hold in check the otherwise economically adequate moral capabilities of the working man (see Dixon, 2008). Seminal economist Alfred Marshall, though responding in a different way, was nevertheless responding to similar concerns. At the core of Marshall's work is the issue of moral character, rather than some narrowly conceived process of rational maximisation. Further, economic equilibrium for Marshall is simply a useful approximation – a station on the road to an understanding of the circumstances in which character is formed. His interest in poverty, signalled from the start of his *Principles*, and thereafter running like a *leitmotif* through his work, was a concern not simply with a deficiency of income but rather with conditions in which the formation of character is obstructed. And it is just this concern that Keynes later takes up in the development of macroeconomics. Indeed Keynes shares more with Ricardo than he cared to admit: though for him the problem was the deadweight-hand of long-term unemployment impeding the otherwise adequate behaviour of independent *Homo economicus*, rather than the deadweight-hand of aristocratic privilege (on Marshall and Keynes, see Dixon and Wilson, 2007). For Keynes the failure of effective

demand is a moral problem, for it impedes the development of an agent capable of making the responsible choices that modern microeconomics assumes and on which modern society depends. But to recognise all of this is to do no more than restore a human scale to the teaching of economics – a scale within which the student can find reflection of their own capabilities and concerns.

We are not suggesting that our way is the only way of understanding these seminal episodes in the development of economic science, or that there are no other episodes yet waiting to be recovered. We are not proposing to substitute one version of Monecon for another. But we would suggest that, from a student-learning perspective, economics is best understood in an episodic, contextual way. Even the modern (dominant) form of economic inquiry presumably has its own contextual *raison d'être*, and would benefit from making that known to students, even if, in Blaug-like fashion, it is presented as a series of mistakes on the road to Truth. In any case, it beggars belief that a subject that ultimately answers to the grand questions of enlightenment thought – questions regarding the very nature of personal identity and its relation to the social – cannot engage student interest without recourse to *avant garde* delivery techniques.

We would also suggest that responsibility for determining the *what* and the *how* of economics teaching needs to be returned to those that actually do it, rather than left in the hands of textbook publishers and teaching experts. For one should not forget that it is the 'difficulty' of the material presented in the former that justifies the existence of the latter, or that it is this convenient nexus of extra-disciplinary interest that crowds out the proper academic interest in the discipline of both teachers and students alike. In an extraordinary turn of events, 'problem-based learning' has come to replace problem-based learning: Monecon, having first stripped economic principle of its inherent problem-based context, and reduced *Homo economicus* to something in which students can find so little of themselves, then invites the T&L specialist to insert some problems of their own, in order to reawaken student enthusiasm.

## Concluding remarks

There is evidence to suggest that students of economics are finding it difficult to develop effective learning strategies and that they would welcome and benefit from the teaching of economics within a more pluralistic framework (Mearman *et al*, 2008). But, despite paying lip service to a greater openness, recent benchmarking statements seem content to underwrite an essentially monist approach to the discipline, in the hope that a deepening of the crisis in economics teaching can be averted by an expansion of teaching and learning programmes – programmes that

take the content of teaching as given and instead concentrate on reform of its presentation.

Teaching and learning economics should not be an ordeal; in the hands of its modern-orthodox practitioners, however, it has *made* itself so. In the interests of underscoring its scientific credentials, whilst making room in the curriculum for 'vocational' elements, recognising the 'demand' for increased 'student choice', and responding (inappropriately) to calls for more bang-per-buck, it *performs* its own difficulty. This performance is the condition of possibility for the rise of T&L. This then is the first part of our critique.

Its second part consists in recognising the limits of T&L. Whatever those at the cutting edge of T&L say, the substantial resources poured into T&L cannot remedy the damage done; rather they can only make matters worse – if only because resources for T&L in the main come at the expense of those devoted to teaching economics properly, i.e., those for whom there is a symbiotic relationship between teaching and research. The limits of T&L then are in its condition of possibility. It arises because of the mistaken belief that we can no longer afford to teach economics properly. Teaching and learning strategies that draw the focus away from the issue of what is being taught, and instead concentrate on presentational matters, are part of the problem rather than its solution.

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