Changing the world one student at a time?

Uncovering subjective understandings of economics instructors’ roles

Katarzyna Gruszka*
Annika Scharbert*
Michael Soder*

The Challenge of Inequality – Societies in crisis
Technisch-Gewerbliche Abendschule
30.09. – 02.10.2015

*Department of Socioeconomics
Institute for Ecological Economics
Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU)
Teaching pluralist economics

The real world should be brought back into the classroom, as well as debate and a pluralism of theories and methods.

(ISIPE 2014)

Available from: http://www.isipe.net/member-groups/
Why bother?

• Pluralism vs. plurality (Mäki 1997, Negru 2010)
• Monistic approaches unfit for complex problems
• Research and teaching do have real life implications (Ferraro et al. 2005)

Pluralism as a call for paradigmatic revision!
Our approach

How is the pluralism debate represented in the economics department and its teaching?

Instructors are situated at the interface of teaching and research. We aim to unravel the role instructors play through investigating the way they see teaching and pluralism in economics.
Q

• Mixed method
• Socially contested topics and concepts
• Aim: rendering shared subjective constructions
• For us: shared constructions on themes within pluralism and teaching economics
• Trigger points?
Q – sneak peek
Our sample

• 25 participants
• 16 male, 9 female
• Age range: 26 – 53, majority in mid-30s
• Range of teaching experience in years: 1 – 25
• Educational background:
  • Economics (18)
  • Additional subjects. e.g. development studies, Business Admin, Mathematics, Political Science

• Institutional affiliation:
  • University / Research Institutes: 17
  • Public agency (incl. National Bank and Chamber of Labour): 8
Results

• 3 factors
  – (1) Pragmatic pluralists
  – (2) Reflexive mainstreamers
  – (3) Utopian pluralists

• The three factors account for 22 of the 25 Q sorts in this study

• Consensus among all three factors:
  – Economics is not inherently objective
  – Philosophy of science is not important for economics curricula
(1) Pragmatic pluralists

- Economy as a living system
- Every school tells a different side of the story
- In analyzing reality, abstraction via models is helpful
- Universities should ensure diversity
- In general, teaching situation is not necessarily problematic
- But contestation (i.e. questioning other schools of thought’s assumptions) needs to be brought into teaching
(2) Reflexive mainstreamers

- Reality is complex
- Results have to be comparable and transparent
- Rationality rules
- Pluralism brings the risk of frustration/confusion
- Criticism towards the methods of teaching (not about what is being taught but how it is being taught)
- University can stay as it is
(3) Utopian pluralists

• Mission with their work/research (improving human welfare!)
• Direct criticism: economics is responsible and in light of the financial crisis, economics has failed.
• Economics is not superior!
• Complexity is important, not confusing
• Having more perspectives doesn’t make things meaningless
• Open criticism of teaching status quo
Next steps?

What do you think about this student plea?

Forget it... I'm not changing my courses... It took me 30 years to perfect them.

http://dhi.ucdavis.edu/files/2014/04/highway_to_horizon-wide.jpg
Thank you!

Katarzyna Gruszka
kgruszka@wu.ac.at

Annika Scharbert
annika.scharbert@wu.ac.at

Michael Soder
michael.soder@wu.ac.at

Department of Socioeconomics
Institute for Ecological Economics
Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU)