

Starting from where they start: thinking about teaching Economics and Business as moving students from something to something better, rather than from nothing to something

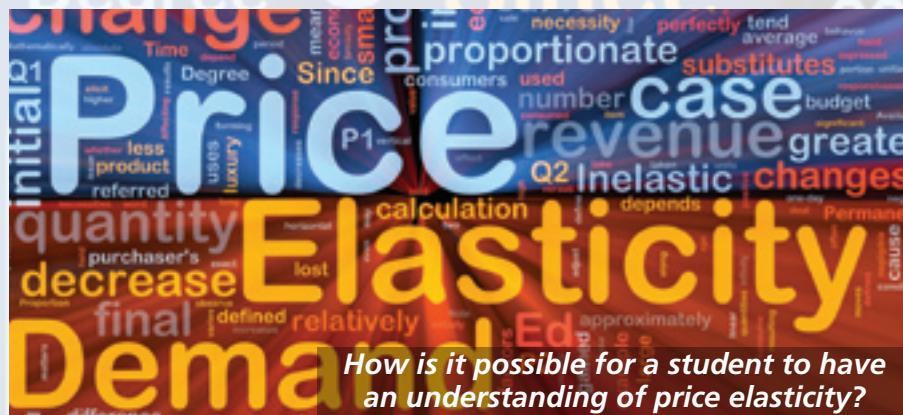
In this article, I want to present a view of teaching in Economics and Business Studies that focuses on changing the way that students already understand the subject rather than on providing them with an understanding that they did not have before. I aim to set out what lessons that are organised around this view would be like, what they might require of teachers and suggest why they might be beneficial.

In Meno's Paradox, Plato showed that gaining knowledge of the world is impossible. This is because it is impossible to search for what you don't know. If you don't know something, then how is it possible to know what to search for to find it out? If you don't know what you are looking for, how can you ever find it? Learning is therefore impossible.

The obvious counter argument to this is that we can learn by being told. Telling can fill the gap between knowing and not knowing – between nothing and something. Students are blank slates on which to write or empty buckets for the teacher to fill. Unfortunately this falls foul of the same problem. If you do not already know what a teacher tells you when you are told it, how can you decide whether it is true or false?

I think that this is much more than clever word play. All teachers face the dilemma of Meno's Paradox. Their personal resolution of it has a powerful effect on what they do in their lessons every day (even if they are not explicitly aware of it).

Here I want to introduce a solution to Meno's Paradox that I think can be very helpful. I want to propose that it is in fact possible to gain knowledge about the world and to learn, because teaching is not a matter of giving



students some understanding that they did not have before, it is a matter of changing what they already know into something better. In other words, I want to argue that students already have experience of or have come across in some way what they are going to be taught and that the role of the teacher is to help them develop a more sophisticated understanding of that experience.

But how it is possible for students to have an understanding of say price elasticity of demand or economies of scale or critical path analysis before the teacher has taught them these ideas? Well, of course, they may not have heard of the terms but, it is highly unlikely to be the case that they have no idea about the underlying concepts. Most likely they will have bought things in bulk or been with people who have, they will have planned in some way or been with people who have and they will have experienced changes in price. In fact, it is quite hard to think of a concept in Economics or Business Studies that students would have no direct experience of or would not have encountered in some way. I guess you could argue that since Economics and Business Studies sets out to analyse aspects of the world that we all experience, then it would be logically impossible for students not to have

encountered the subject matter of Economics or Business Studies in some form or other. If this is the case, it isn't that students have no sense of any particular topic when they come into the classroom it is just that they do not necessarily have a very well-developed sense.

Lessons in which teachers take this view will have a distinct character. They will be focused more on changing the way that students think about the topic rather than on just providing them with subject input. In these lessons it will not be a case of students being right or wrong or of them understanding or not understanding, it will be more of case of students understanding in this way or in that way. Lessons will not tend to focus on correcting students' mistakes they will be about the teacher working out how to move students' understanding on.

Teaching like this requires that teachers do two things. First, to start where students start, they will need to think in a particular way about the topics being taught. They will need to boil a topic down to its underlying principles, go behind the headline of the terminology and work out what's really going on. Second, if they are to move students on to more sophisticated ways of understanding,

Debate

teachers will need a clear idea of what those different levels of understanding are. Neither of these things is necessarily very easy – particularly at first.

However, I think that there are good reasons for giving it a go. A lesson that starts with their understanding is likely to be much more engaging to students because they can see the relevance of the topic and therefore of Business and Economics to their lives. It is also more likely to have a more profound effect on them, genuinely changing the way they think because it sets new ways of thinking into the context of what they already know. They are therefore less likely to take on board subject matter in a remote and superficial way and more likely to be able to apply their understanding in different situations.

The approach that I have been discussing here is based in phenomenography and was first developed by Ference Marton in the 1980's at the University of Gothenburg. The basic assumption of phenomenography is that people have a limited number of qualitatively different ways of understanding any particular phenomenon and so learning is defined as the acquisition of more sophisticated ways of understanding. It's worth pointing out that this is rather a different view of what it means to learn something than that implied by Bloom's Taxonomy. Phenomenography does not focus on the development of skills such as analysis or evaluation, rather it highlights the structure of understanding of the subject itself. This is what makes the approach so useful. Bloom's Taxonomy is not at all

good at helping to describe the type of understanding that students bring with them to the start of a lesson and teachers need a different way of thinking.

I appreciate that this might be a controversial set of ideas and that in the space available I may not have explained them fully. I would certainly welcome comment either directly, on the EBEA Blog or in the pages of this journal. However, my strongly held belief remains that if learning is building a bridge between the known and the unknown, it makes much more sense to anchor things firmly in the known side rather than start in mid-stream.

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