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## Title: “What Approach Should Economic Teachers Use in the Classroom?”

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Date: “December 15, 2018”

output: html\_document df\_print: paged pdf\_document: citation\_package: natbib fig\_caption: yes keep\_tex: yes latex\_engine: pdfflatex template: ./svm-latex-ms.tex biblio-style: apsr fontfamily: mathpazo fontsize: 11pt geometry: margin=1in keywords: bibliography: ./master.bib spacing: double

### Abstract:

In this essay I give a brief synopsis of James M. Buchanan’s article on What should Economists do? I attempt to apply Buchanan’s methodology of how economists should approach economics, to how economic teachers should teach economic classes. This essay focuses on the use of economic history, the approach to deep learning, and how a decreased focus on mathematical functions should be relied on to create a lasting understanding for students. In conclusion, this approach will advance understanding, and hopefully aid in the teaching of future economists.

### Introduction

A well-known economist, James M. Buchanan, wrote an article in 1964 for the *Southern Economic Journal*. In the article he outlines the current methodology of computational economists and proposes a different way economists should approach economics. He wrote “Economists should concentrate their attention on a particular form of human activity and upon the various institutional arrangements that arise as a result of this form of activity.” @Buchanan1979 In short, economists should focus on interactions of others and the different structures between markets and people.

In Buchanan’s research he found that economists’ methods are narrow, complex, and rely heavily on applied mathematicians. He also found that many economists are focusing on allocating scarce resources for competing uses. “If there is nothing more to economics than this, we had as well turn it over to the applied

mathematicians.” @Buchanan1979 Economists should focus on their own subject matter instead of applied mathematics as Buchanan wrote. Buchanan is not suggesting a change in the subject matter but a change in the approach.

Buchanan proposes the question, “How should the economist conceive the market organization?” @Buchanan1979 In his response he analyzes two conflicting answers. First, the economist will look at the market as a means of accomplishing economic purposes that any society needs and by doing so the market becomes an “engineered construction, a mechanism, an analogue calculating machine, a computational device.” @Buchanan1979 Second, the market is not a means to accomplish anything. As an alternative, it is simply an exchange process between individuals reaching agreements in trading. This is what constitutes the market.

In his article “What Should Economists Do?” Buchanan proposes that economists should approach economics in a different way by focusing on interactions and relationships between individuals and markets. After conducting my own research, I would have to agree with Buchanan that a shift should take place concerning the methodology and approach to their field of study. Michael Kitson, a senior lecturer at the University of Cambridge said “Economics needs to stop clinging to the notion that the complexities of human behavior can be explained by algorithms or mathematical proofs.” @kitson\_janeway\_2014 Human behavior is a constant changing variable that cannot be explained and predicted by a mathematical function.

## Proposal

This paper will focus largely on the methodology of professors and how economic principles are presented to college students. I will attempt to apply a similar approach to Buchanan in proposing a different way for economic teachers to present material to their students, which will affect student outlook and approach to economics. Amending teachers’ processes in the classroom by including less math, more economic history, and fostering an environment for deep learning to take place will lead to a rising generation of new economists who can apply economic theory and approach economic events from a different perspective.

## A Different Approach

An economics class based on mathematics and models will be deemed as a math class in a student’s mind and not a class where they can learn about economic history and thought. As teachers and professors place a heavy emphasis on economic models, especially in introductory economic courses, students will not gain an understanding of economic thought and history that will help them

apply what they have learned after the class has commenced. In the *Journal of Economic Education*, it states: “Models have to be frequently discarded and fundamentally new ones have to be brought to bear to make them relevant to changed circumstances.” @shiller2010should Constantly changing economic models does not provide a solid basis for economic understanding. As was mentioned earlier in Buchanan’s essay, math should be left to the mathematicians and economists should focus on economics.

I am proposing that teachers foster an environment where the method of deep learning occurs. This method is explained in “Approaches to Economic Education” by stating, “this approach distinguishes argument from evidence, relates and integrates knowledge from a variety of sources, and tries to organize the course content into structures of several dimensions.” @Jackson\_Ross\_2005 By creating a deep learning environment, teachers would assess their students by open-ended conceptual learning rather than multiple choice or true false exams. A good example would be an essay where students can choose their topic, length, and arguments. Leaving assignments and assessments open-ended can result in student error but this approach to learning promises conceptual growth. @Jackson\_Ross\_2005

Additionally, a deep learning approach will allow students to relate what is being taught to their own lives outside of the classroom. “Deep approaches to learning grow from encouraging students to apply what they are learning to their own lives, and to consider messy reality rather than sterile thought experiments.” @Jackson\_Ross\_2005 This approach benefits not only future economists and how they view their careers but helps those students who will not be economists to maintain a functional understanding of the economic world around them.

In contrast, many students are accustomed to surface approach learning in the classroom. “A student who takes a surface approach to learning is one who strives to reproduce what the teacher does without trying to understand why the teacher does it that way.” @Jackson\_Ross\_2005 Students generate notes to aid them in passing assessments rather than conceptualize the material to benefit them outside of the classroom. Teachers often notice long-term effects of surface approach learning when many graduates cannot recall what they learned in the university just a few short years later. @Jackson\_Ross\_2005 This is evidence that a change needs to first, take place in the classroom for students to conceptualize economic subject matter after graduation.

At this point in this essay, I would like to focus on students and their opinions of how the subject of economics is taught. My proposed method of deep learning in the classroom will serve as the answer to student dissatisfaction. “Student dissatisfaction with macroeconomic teaching is to the (correct) sense that the economic models that they are being taught are ephemeral and hence will not serve them in their practical lives a few years down the road.” @shiller2010should When changing economic models and are relied on to teach economic principles, students will not see the importance to retain the information that they have been taught which in turn has a negative effect in economic understanding.

To positively change student dissatisfaction, students need engaging activities and lessons that allow room for personal growth and understanding. So, the question is, what do students say they want? “They usually describe a good class in the same terms (as teachers) more often than not, both say they want active experiences on a high level. Neither wants passive and boring sessions where their minds wander to what to have for lunch...and students say they want classes to be lively and relevant.” @Jackson\_Ross\_2005 By teaching relevant thought processes, the rising generation of economists will change their approach in understanding real world economics of the time. Michael Jackson and Russell Ross of the University of Sydney say it best, “Student learning in economics is about conceptual change growth, and enrichment of the means to understanding.” @Jackson\_Ross\_2005

## A Change in Economic Understanding

With my proposed method future economists will broaden their scope and change their perspective and as Buchanan said, “modify their thought processes, to look at the same phenomena through another window.” @Buchanan1979 A deeper learning will not only affect future economists, but will improve the view of those persons who have engaged in classes regarding economics and future economic events, such as a recession.

Along with a deep approach to learning, it is important to view past events such as the Great Depression of the 1930's and the Great Recession in 2008 to guide economists in future events and crises. A good understanding of past events will allow high level debate and well-thought-out approaches. Occasionally, an economist will error, but a broader perspective will allow for personal growth in the profession. Often economists are quick to blame the mathematic functions in a crisis, which results in a close-minded attitude. “Often their solution seems to be that the mathematics used wasn't good enough, that you just need to change the assumptions upon which the models were based.” @kitson\_janeway\_2014 Utilizing an open-minded approach will lead to better decision making in the wake of a crisis.

In the 1930's the United States and the World experienced an economic crash. Unemployment rates were at an all-time high and the stock market caused severe panic and a run on banks. The recovery of such a crisis took many years and is a topic still discussed today. This has been attributed to weak macroeconomic theory and a method to develop that theory. @shiller2010should “The reality is that macroeconomic theory has never arrived at a genuine accounting of the ultimate sources of macroeconomic fluctuations.” @shiller2010should My hope is with the proposed deep learning approach in the classroom, it will help individuals to better understand and develop macroeconomic theory.

In more recent years The Great Recession of 2008 has shown similarly weak

macroeconomic theory as in the Great Depression. @shiller2010should Doctor Shiller believes that for better macroeconomic understanding, economists need to “respect alternative ways of understanding macroeconomics and that we keep a long historical perspective on the history of economic thought.” @shiller2010should Economists can look for alternate views through other social sciences such as psychology, sociology, and political science.

## Conclusion

Similar to Buchanan’s analysis of reforming economists’ approach to economics, I am proposing that economics teachers reform their teaching methods and broaden their understanding of deep learning; thus, students will retain the information and utilize it in their future understanding of economics and as future economists. Buchanan stated, “I am simply proposing in various ways, that economists concentrate attention on the institutions, the relationships, among individuals as they participate in voluntarily organized activity.” @Buchanan1979 My proposal is specifically related to Buchanan in a conceptual aspect in which I agree that teachers should focus less on applied mathematics and more on economic relationships and interactions.

In short, amending teachers processes in the classroom by including less math, more economic history, and fostering an environment for deep learning to take place will lead to a rising generation of new economists who can apply economic theory and approach economic events from a different perspective. I am not proposing that the use of mathematics or current economic thought is incorrect, but I am proposing that an improvement can be made to current economic teaching.

## References

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