

Responses to “[How to Change the Teaching of Economics](#)
Updated 11/25/14

General Response:

Dear Neva,

Just responding to your invitation to comment on your report. It looks good. I wrote [my PhD](#) on this very topic (note that pages 194-7 contain a brief case of your excellent textbook) so I have a few comments. My main suggestion would be to expand the range of strategies and to couch all the various measures in terms of three meta-strategies:

1. Reform from within traditional centres of economics teaching
2. Reform from outside traditional centres of economics (e.g. a separate dept of political economy see Chapter 11 of thesis).
3. Hybrid Strategies (e.g. a PPE degree that structurally integrates economics with other disciplines see Chapter 10 of thesis).

My feeling is that strategies 2 and 3 are under-utilised yet that appear to often be more promising than strategy one. I would not say strategy 1 should be abandoned, but greater attention to strategies 2 and 3 seem warranted given the ongoing difficulties of achieving real reform. Of course, it is possible to pursue more than one of these meta-strategies at once.

Succinct summaries of some of the key arguments made in the thesis are listed below and attached with this email.

Thornton, T. & Argyrous, G. 2014. ‘Disciplinary Differentiation and Institutional Independence: a Viable Template for a Pluralist Economics’, *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, Volume 5 (2). [[Access via InsiderScience](#)]

Thornton, T. 2013. ‘The Narrowing of the Australian Economics Curriculum: an Analysis of the Problem and a Suggested Solution’, *The Economic Record*, Volume 89 S(1), July, pp. 206-114. [[Access via Wiley Online Library](#)]

Thornton, T. 2014. ‘A Conversation with Professor Frank Stilwell’, *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, Volume 5 (2). [[Access via InsiderScience](#)]

Also, [this article](#) won't tell you anything you don't know but it has a great cartoon!

Best regards
Tim Thornton

Responses to specific survey question

1. Have you used any of the strategies mentioned in this report? Please tell us about your experience.

Hans Janssen: I teach Economics in the Diploma Programme of the International Baccalaureate. Although this is secondary school teaching I learned a lot from a new approach implemented recently. Our students learn to view an economy as the field where needs are to be satisfied in a sustainable, fair way. The role of government is to be studied in all areas of economic activity; its successes and its failures. Do we need more market / less government? Under what circumstances is it better to have less market / more government? Traditionally economics courses follow a sequence of microeconomics, macroeconomics and trade / development theory. In the GDAE courses this is visible as well, although more integration takes place already. In my view, courses should be based on a clear structure with one overriding concept, and elaboration in different directions so that students know what to expect of the teaching order. My focus lies on the inherent nature of our capitalist market economy that is continually shaping and reshaping the world. Globalization is obviously the concept that springs to mind. Still, the level of abstraction could be increased to help 'pin' the teaching: the concept of change is essential in this context. Students who want to understand past, present and future of economic activity and policy will need to have a fundamental grasp of change as the guiding force. Not just Keynesian versus neo-classical theories, but what fundamental objectives did they try to achieve? For most students, an economics course will be one of the stepping-stones to their engagement in leadership, be it in business or the public domain. They will thus need to understand some of the micro / macroeconomic problems, and to find appropriate business strategies or public policies. Example: the problem of unemployment. What changes have taken place in the structure of an economy that have created unemployment in recent years? In which fields of industry / services would there be opportunities for new jobs? What is needed to be done by business / government to create these new jobs? In both areas, being a manager of change will help to achieve goals. Your task as an institute of education will be to guide students in the direction of learning how to manage change for sustainability and more equal distribution of income. Theory should be centered around understanding processes of change, be it the power of wealth and information or access and ownership of resources (Ed Whitfield gave a simple but essential view in his speech on fishing poles!). Economics courses should thus be advertised as providing a contribution to the training of leadership for change in the areas of sustainability and fair distribution of wealth and income, be it in the private or public sphere. In many courses, I guess the main issues above are included already; it comes down to putting them in the appropriate context to come to a coherent programme.

Adem Acar: think that the students have several difficulties in the first year. Particularly they do not notice importance conceptual thinking. Moreover, they assume economy as neoclassic and Keynesian economics. Therefore the teaching "economics" or for me political economy should different perspective for students.

Mark Vian: I'm not an economist, but a restoration ecologist working for the NYCDEP Bureau of Water Supply in the Catskills, with a strong interest in political economy. I train a cadre of summer interns from my local community college (SUNY Ulster) in the specifics of watershed management, but include a module on how political economy affects environmental management in the context of government agencies' budgets, political-economic pressures on the environmental regulatory institutions, and in turn, how climate change is likely to affect public fiscal policy going forward, at the local, state and federal levels. I frame all of this in the context of giving them realistic expectations re: the impact of political economy on their careers: this seems to be something on which they are keenly focused.

Anonymous: Yes, Land Rights and Land Value Capture online course. Paper presentations, PowerPoint, lots of lectures in 30 countries,

Michael Daley: I have used your textbooks in the Green Learning Community at UNE for 8 years now. I teach economics in a rigorously integrated setting along with biology, environmental studies, and nature literature.

Gary Flomenhoft: Have used your book macroeconomics in context, with additional insights from Polanyi and Henry George/Ricardo. Students are very receptive.

2. Do you know of additional resources for improving the teaching of economics? Please share URL or send documents to gdae@tufts.edu

Hans Janssen: [Economics Course Companion](#), J. Blink and I. Dorton, Oxford University Press

Jacquelyn Kirkland: We have some [resources on the CASSE website](#) for teaching ecological economics & steady state economics.

Adem Acar: [Why Economists Disagree](#), Ken Cole, John Cameron, Chris Edwards Addison-Wesley Longman Limited, 1991.

Mark Vian: YouTube videos. e.g., the [RSA animation of a D. Harvey's lecture](#).

Jeff Smith: [Corruption of Economics](#), Mason Gaffney, 2007 [Excerpts [available here](#)]

Anonymous: YES, much on commons rent / land value tax/ green taxes.

Michael Daley: A colleague, Dr. Owen Grumbling, and I have a paper currently being reviewed for publication on [Teaching Economics In a Interdisciplinary Setting](#).

G. Omkarnath: I have read with much interest your feature on teaching of economics. As one active in the area, may I bring to your notice a recent book of mine ([ECONOMICS - A PRIMER FOR INDIA](#), New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012. Reprinted 2013). It tries to demonstrate that a non-neoclassical introduction to economics is possible and effective.

John Komlos: I think you might be interested in [my new book](#)

Gary Flomenhoft: Steve Keen, *Debunking Economics*

3. Do you have other suggestions for improving economics education?

Anonymous: You must address the ethnocentrism and racism that exists in US Economics departments.

Mark Vian: You mentioned the integration with other disciplines. My academic introduction to heterodox economics was through a multi-semester graduate seminar in the Geography dept at Ohio State University many years ago. I believe the seminar is still running... so think Geography in addition to Planning.

Jeff Smith: <http://www.progress.org/petition-to-official-data-sources/>

Anonymous: Integrate cooperative economics; Integrate markets as social constructs; Discuss transfer pricing; Differentiate economics as a tool for social improvement from economics as a device for social control by corporations.

Anonymous: Yes, I hope you go in depth on land value tax shift and other "unearned income / commons rent" public finance policies.

Rich Rosen: I did not see anything about deep uncertainty in these critiques of economic teaching and theory. Deep uncertainty implies that economic models can not be useful for more than a few years into the future. Shouldn't this factor be included?

Charlie Hall & Kent Klitgaard: In examining your progress so far on this critical subject I think you are still rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. There are far larger issues pertaining to the very essence of what economics should be than I think are being covered here. Most fundamentally if you ask students what economics means to them they usually respond "food on the table", "roof over their heads", textbooks purchased and tuition paid. Mostly this is about stuff from the biophysical world brought about by processes within the biophysical world and most essentially through the use of energy. So why, we ask, should economics be only a social science divorced, or at least isolated, from the physics and chemistry and geology and biology that the student might be learning in other courses? Why is energy viewed as a commodity rather than the (demonstrably) most important factor of production?

Biophysical economics is a radically different approach to economics which we have found our students in both liberal arts and science schools take to quite readily and often with great enthusiasm. The principles are laid out in our book "Energy and the wealth of nations: understanding the biophysical economy" (Springer) and further developed in dozens of papers and 5 annual meetings of from 50 to 100 adherents. We develop explicitly some critical problems with how traditional (including neoclassical and ecological) economics fails some critical tests and offer alternatives based on natural sciences. There is much more we can say, but this is the essence.