BOOK REVIEW


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Simon Bowmaker’s The Heart of Teaching Economics explores the approaches and attitudes to teaching of twenty one leading researchers in a wide range of fields within economics. It employs a semi-structured interview methodology where subjects were asked a common set of questions but also follow-up questions or questions tailored to issues specific to their circumstances or interests. The common questions inquired about such things as: the source of inspiration for the interviewee’s interest in economics; the nature of any influences from their own economics teachers; the methods employed by the interviewee in their teaching; how they understood the learning process to work; the balance they struck in their teaching between formalism and reality; what they liked and disliked about teaching; the degree to which they engage with colleagues about teaching; and whether they saw teaching and research as complements or substitutes. After an opening overview chapter, Bowmaker presents the transcript of each interview as a separate chapter, recording the subject’s responses to the set of questions they were asked. Interviews are divided into three groups, categorised by the subject matter taught by the interviewee. These groups are: fundamentals, itself comprised of introductory and intermediate micro and macro; tools, made up of game theory, econometrics and behavioural economics; and applications, basically a broad range of specialist fields within the discipline.

The value of Bowmaker’s volume is that it provides qualitative evidence regarding the thinking about teaching at some of the United States’ most prestigious universities. Given the role played by these
institutions in shaping the modern economics discipline, this evidence is important. But it must also be noted that Bowmaker’s book is inherently US-centric since while some of the scholars interviewed were trained outside the U.S., not a single person interviewed holds a position outside that country. Given the role that institutional culture plays in shaping attitudes to teaching and research, and given the distinctive culture of leading U.S. universities, inclusion of a few cross-country interviewees would have made for some useful comparisons.

Bowmaker’s list of interview questions is also problematic in that he provides no rationale or justification for his choice of these questions. The questions are mostly sensible at an intuitive level but one would have expected a teaching scholar to have thought about the conceptual structure of these questions and to have drawn upon the relevant educational literature in choosing them. Becker’s (1997) treatment of undergraduate education or Hansen’s (2001) set of graduate proficiencies, to cite two possibilities, would have provided such a justification, but Bowmaker simply lists his questions without such reflection.

To his credit, Bowmaker includes history of economic thought and economic history in his third, applications section, but there is no consideration of heterodox approaches to economics, such as Post-Keynesian or institutional economics, and even more disappointingly, there is no consideration of mathematics, economic philosophy or methodology in the tools section. These latter omissions are curious given that game theory and behavioural economics are regarded as tools rather than as either specialist fields or as fundamental frameworks. This, again, reflects a feature of Bowmaker’s approach that no rationale is provided for his analytical choices. Here, a principle for distinguishing between a conceptual tool and a particular theoretical or methodological approach to economics was really required. It may well be the case that many economists would be comfortable with Bowmaker’s classification but this does not substitute for careful and well-articulated analytical thinking.

The amount of material generated by Bowmaker’s questions is too large to provide detailed comment in a short review but two central matters are noteworthy. The first arises from Becker’s (1997) analysis which highlights the importance of non-traditional teaching methods because of the way educational theorists have increasingly argued that people learn. Ramsden (1992, pp.15-85), for example, argues that
people learn effectively not simply by hearing explanations or having ideas transmitted to them, but by actively engaging with the ideas embedded in those explanations, by using and exploring those ideas for themselves (Ramsden 1992, p.81). Economists, according to Becker, are notorious for their over-reliance on lecturing as an educational method, a method that essentially presupposes a *transmission* theory of learning rather than an *engagement* theory. Bowmaker’s question about how interviewees understand the learning process is thus a question that directly addresses one of the key issues in economic education, at least from the stance of Becker’s (1997) analysis. It is thus of considerable interest what leading economists think about the learning process.

Unfortunately, the responses to this question were disappointing, as Bowmaker very diplomatically observes in his introduction to the book. Virtually none of the economists interviewed had any idea about how people learn and admitted as much, by and large without apology. Responses such as “I’m not an expert on how humans learn, that’s for sure”, “I don’t claim to know a lot about this”, and “I have to admit that I haven’t really thought about this one” were common. More thoughtful responses were made by Steven Landsburg, who recognised the existence of a variety of learning styles, and the urban economist, Edward Glaeser, who tantalisingly admitted the possibility of what philosophers call a *testimonial* or *credulist* epistemology (see Pritchard 2014, pp.80, 84-85). According to this approach, we accept as true what those around us *tell us* is true until we have good reason to doubt such testimony. We thus learn by a process of socialisation. But the implications of this interesting perspective were not really teased out in much detail by Glaeser in the space available for his answer.

Probably the most considered answer came from behavioural economist David Laibson who essentially made the distinction between the transmission and engagement theories of learning highlighted above. He strongly emphasised the importance of actively engaging students in the classroom and outlined a number of ways in which he did that, including by the use of classroom experiments (a sensible strategy for a behavioural economist). Barry Eichengreen and John List also acknowledged the importance of active learning. Robert Frank correctly pointed out that academic economists receive little training in education whether theoretical or practical, and are forced to rely on intuition or their experience as students when they arrive in the classroom after completing graduate school. This is despite the
existence of a substantial body of knowledge that has been accumulated about how people learn. This is, of course, a point already made quite forcefully by Colander & McGoldrick (2009) in The Teagle Report, but it is a point worth repeating and it is interesting that the two behavioural economists interviewed for the volume were those whose awareness of learning processes was most acute.

The second noteworthy issue addressed by the responses in Bowmaker’s volume is the relationship between teaching and research. This is an issue of perennial interest and frustration for many academics (see Becker & Kennedy 2005, p.172; and Colander & McGoldrick 2009, pp.8-14), and one might think that colleagues with considerable research success and a strong on-going interest in teaching might have something useful to say about the relationship between these activities. In fact, given the strong research credentials of those interviewed, this may well have been the most important contribution of Bowmaker’s volume.

There are, again, unfortunately, grounds for disappointment. A good number of the responses contained little more than homespun platitudes, indicating that these respondents hadn’t really given the matter any serious thought, and didn’t really have anything useful to say on the subject. Of the other responses, a small number seemed to think that the best researchers made the best teachers (naturally). For one interviewee this was because some people are just more naturally gifted than their peers and are thus better at everything (i.e. their production possibility frontiers are further from the origin). For another interviewee it is because the intellectual skills that enable a researcher to choose important questions, and to arrive at insightful answers to those questions, are the same skills required to communicate ideas effectively to others and this lies at the heart of good teaching. A third interviewee expressed it in terms of someone who wants to learn to “play the flute” simply going to the best “flute player”.

These cases for complementarity were all based on teacher-researcher characteristics rather than on the nature of the activities themselves. A number of other interviewees cited the obvious trade-off between the two activities based on the existence of a time constraint. Some concluded that this was the dominating factor and that the two activities were therefore inherent substitutes, while others allowed for the complicating effects of joint production to overwhelm the effect of the time constraint, making teaching and research complements.
The most interesting responses on this issue came from Caroline Hoxby, John List, and Robert Gordon. Caroline Hoxby argued that the precise relationship between teaching and research was different in the short and long runs. The short-run was characterised, according to Hoxby, by the binding time constraint, so that the two activities where essentially substitutes. The long-run, however, introduced the possibility of questions from good students, which force the instructor into deeper thinking about the issues, and this can generate good research questions, making the two activities complementary. John List thought that there was an inherent complementarity up to the point of teaching one class in any area, but beyond that point, teaching and research become substitutes. The source of this complementarity for List, lay in preparation rather than in student engagement. It is preparation that forces one to think deeply about the field, and which may bring to one’s attention new ideas for research. But once the preparation is done, additional time teaching may be spent on research, and the complementarity evaporates.

Macroeconomist Robert Gordon argued for a deep complementarity which arises from the approach he takes to teaching intermediate macroeconomics, to writing and constantly updating his textbook in this field, and which he also uses in his teaching, and to his research. For Gordon, teaching is not so much about working through the mechanics of formal models for their own sake but about looking at, and attempting to explain, real economic phenomena. He certainly uses formal models to do this, and he certainly works through the mechanics of these models as part of his approach to teaching. But economic questions and phenomena are the focus rather than the models, and this appears to make a big difference as to how his teaching and research are related. He thus makes considerable use of data from his textbook in his teaching, and because he researches in empirical macroeconomics, data from his research is also used in this way so that his research informs his teaching. But his discussion of economic phenomena with students raises issues which feed into his research both because new questions or connections occur to him as he engages in this discussion, and because bright students also pose questions which sometimes lead to new research ideas. The complementarity here appears to be a genuine two-way, highly integrated relationship.

Bowmaker’s interviews, therefore, add the support of useful qualitative evidence to the conclusions we can draw from Becker &
Kennedy’s (2005) systematic documentation of the teaching-research nexus. And Gordon’s reflections provide a rich and exemplary model of the potential for a closely integrated nexus which a more limited survey would not have been able to pick up.

An additional issue that stood out from the discussion in Bowmaker’s interviews was the issue of why more women do not study economics and go on to become academic economists. The three interviews in which this was raised were those with Caroline Hoxby, Shoshana Grossbard and Nancy Folbre. Caroline Hoxby attributed the low involvement of women in the profession to its “male-dominated” culture which she saw as revolving around pride in mathematical prowess although she did not think that women were reluctant to employ formal modelling in their work. Shoshana Grossbard also cited mathematics as a potential obstacle for women becoming more interested in economics, not so much because of any lack ability in this area but because of the level of abstraction that tends to characterise mathematical approaches to economics. She seemed to think that women might be more interested in approaches to economics that were grounded in more realistic perspectives, citing the rise of empirical fields under the influence of James Heckman as a positive example. Nancy Folbre went further and explicitly linked economic methodology to masculine perspectives on the world, particularly its emphasis on individualist, self-interested motivation. She thought that a female perspective was more likely to bring the social interdependency of things like preferences into the analysis, so that the more tolerance for such perspectives there was in the discipline, the more likely it would be for women to be interested in an economics career.

Of these three interviewees, none were able to point to female role models or teachers that had had a significant intellectual influence on the development of their careers, indicating the importance of this set of questions. Curiously, questions about impediments to women becoming economists, or the role of women in the profession, appeared to be put to none of the male interviewees.

The prize for the most engaging interview for me went to that with Robert Gordon. This was not because I agreed with him on a number of the perspectives he offered in the interview but because his passion for explaining economic phenomena was so clearly apparent. In answering a number of the questions, his focus went immediately to ideas, and I found myself thinking about economics (rather than about teaching),
and why I did or did not agree with him. I could imagine that he would be an excellent teacher precisely because this passion would be contagious, and students would be motivated to think about economics and engage with it as a result. But I had this reaction to only one of the twenty one interviews in the volume, and this is why most teachers need to know something about the learning process, and why they need strategies to engage students more actively. Most teachers will not have Gordon’s inherently inspirational approach to their teaching and will need to draw on a broader knowledge base and skill set to enhance the effectiveness of their teaching.

Overall, Bowmaker’s volume will be interesting to many engaged teachers of economics because it is always fascinating to see how various leading names of the discipline approach the same task that we each have to execute in our own departments. This is especially true for names in the fields within which we individually work. But I suspect many will be disappointed with what they find. I also think that Bowmaker himself could have grounded the volume in a more scholarly approach that drew upon the educational literature in economics and beyond to justify and refine his approach.

REFERENCES