SYMPOSIUM ON HOYT AND MCGOLDRICK’S
INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK ON TEACHING AND
LEARNING ECONOMICS: INTRODUCTION *

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ABSTRACT

This symposium provides a brief survey and review of Gail Hoyt’s and KimMarie McGoldrick’s International Handbook on Teaching and Learning Economics. Our introduction reflects on some of the Handbook’s broad strengths and some areas that might be improved if the editors were to consider a subsequent edition. Other papers in the symposium provide reflections on specific aspects of the work: Harry Tse considers the chapters on non-traditional teaching methods; Gordon Menzies considers the teaching of environmental and international economics; and Amir Armanious reflects on the teaching of principles courses. Overall we conclude that the International Handbook is a welcome contribution to the available resources for those wanting to enhance the quality of economics education around the world. While there is room for a slightly improved subsequent edition, its guide to non-traditional teaching techniques, its reflection on the challenges of teaching particular courses, and its introduction to the issues and challenges of educational research in economics will be of value to thoughtful teachers and researchers in economics education.

Keywords: Economics education, economic pedagogy, pedagogical research.

JEL classifications: A20, A29.
1. INTRODUCTION

Gail Hoyt and KimMarie McGoldrick (2012) have done those seriously interested in economics education a great service by editing this important volume. In seventy six chapters and just over eight hundred and fifty pages, they have assembled a single reference work to which those interested in enhancing the quality of their teaching can turn for ideas, an understanding of best practise, and assistance with research to evaluate new approaches and possibilities. Contributors to the volume come from a wide range of fields and institutions within the discipline, but all are experienced teachers or educational researchers.

The Handbook is divided into six parts: A History of Economic Education; Teaching; Research; Content; Institutional and Administrative (Perspectives); and Initiatives for Teaching Enhancement. The first of these sections is made up of a single chapter by Phillip Saunders of Indiana University that traces concern and support for economics education through a number of North American institutions including the American Economic Association. The two largest sections are those on Teaching and Content. The first of these contains chapters on the practical aspects of how we teach, such as various pedagogical techniques, technologies for use in the classroom, and assessment methods. The second deals with approaches to teaching subject areas from principles courses to the full range of senior courses in specialist fields. The Research section deals with issues in the conduct of pedagogical research and evaluation including major findings about the teaching of principles courses, the effectiveness of non-traditional pedagogies, educational measurement, and factors that determine educational performance. The Institutional and Administrative (Perspectives) section deals with the structure of the economics major, curriculum issues in highly ranked schools, programs for faculty development, and various international perspectives on economics education. The final section deals with funding for economics education, organisations that support economics education and economics teaching workshops in the United States.

There are too many entries to evaluate each one in a short review such as this. We therefore reflect on some of the Handbook’s broad strengths, and some areas that might be improved if the editors were to consider a subsequent edition. We then make some general comments in conclusion. Other papers in this mini-symposium provide reflections on specific aspects of the work: Harry Tse considers the chapters on non-
traditional teaching methods; Gordon Menzies considers the teaching of environmental and international economics; and Amir Armanious reflects on the teaching of principles courses.

2. SOME PARTICULAR STRENGTHS OF THE HANDBOOK

By far, the best feature of Hoyt’s and McGoldrick’s volume is its documentation of non-traditional pedagogical techniques in Part II on Teaching. This part is divided into five smaller sections, the first and largest of which is the central section devoted to a range of teaching approaches that can replace or supplement the traditional method of lecturing. There are eleven entries in this section dealing with techniques from the use of cases to co-operative learning, classroom discussions and the use of writing to actively engage students in the learning process. Many of these entries deal with the same approaches and are by the same authors as those in Salemi & Walstad (2010), but given their importance and the comprehensive objective of the Hoyt and McGoldrick volume, they are sensibly included here. The value of these entries is that the teacher who wishes to take up Becker’s (1997) famous challenge of expanding his or her repertoire of approaches in the classroom, can find one that suits their particular objectives, and is described in sufficient detail that an initial plan for change can be developed. Sufficient guidance to initiate further research into the approach is also provided. The entries are clearly designed to provide this level of insight without being too long or unnecessarily comprehensive.

A related strength is the material in Part IV of the book on Content that complements the earlier technique-based material. Here you will find issues that arise in the teaching of principles and intermediate courses, econometrics, game theory, law and economics, industrial economics, experimental economics, growth and development, and a number of other specific subject areas. The expertise of experienced teachers in these fields, including some well-known economists such as Robert Frank and Jeffrey Wooldridge, is the foundation for a range of useful insights about how specialised courses might be approached that can be used with the material on techniques to design interesting and engaging learning experiences for students in these areas.

A third strength of the book is that it gives some consideration to issues which are often sidelined in the discipline. The role of ethics in how the discipline is shaped and what we might consider teaching students is represented by Jonathan Wight’s chapter in Part II, as are
issues of gender, race and class in the chapters by Jean Shackelford and Robin Bartlett. Interdisciplinarity, heterodox economics and their implications for teaching are given some attention in the chapters by Arthur Goldsmith, James Casey, Robert Garnett, Jack Reardon and William Waller. Garnett and Reardon nicely make the case for pluralism and the intellectual legitimacy of looking at economics from more than one perspective in contrast to “Samuelsonian monism” that relentlessly and pseudo-scientifically applies the marginalist principle of comparing decreasing returns and increasing costs to every possible economic question. Waller highlights the place of non-neoclassical approaches in the development of economic thinking through time, and the logical possibility of applying these approaches to present day problems that complements the Garnett and Reardon chapter. This suggests the need to teach students the history of economic thought and economic history for which the Hoyt and McGoldrick volume also makes space.

A fourth strength of the book is that it provides some guidance for teachers who are also interested in thoroughly evaluating pedagogical initiatives. Part III on Research thus contains some useful chapters that summarise some of the main findings on the factors that account for effective learning, such as student and teacher characteristics, and the relative effectiveness of the non-traditional pedagogies described earlier in the book. There are also useful chapters on measuring educational outcomes and where to publish educational research. But the highlight of this part of the book is the chapter by William Bosshardt and the late Peter Kennedy on data sources and econometric techniques that every educational researcher should read. This chapter provides an excellent introduction to the logic, design and conduct of quantitative educational research, and considers the typical econometric problems, such as selection bias, that arise in this research, and how they can be managed.

Overall then, Hoyt’s and McGoldrick’s Handbook provides an excellent single reference for those wanting to enhance their own teaching practice, to think about the content or context of their teaching, or to begin structuring educational research that evaluates their own teaching innovations or those being widely recommended by others.

3. POTENTIAL ENHANCEMENTS FOR FUTURE EDITIONS
That the Handbook is an excellent resource for economic educators does not of course mean that there is not room for improvement. A few
possibilities standout. The first is that the underlying logic for the way the book is structured is not clear, and this structure could be better. This is particularly reflected in the book’s opening. Part I on the History of Economic Education contains some interesting material but is largely an account of institutional policies and educational politics in the United States that is a little dry and may not be the best way to orient the reader to the volume’s objectives. Of much greater value would have been an account by the editors of the range of issues addressed in the volume and how they relate to each other. An account of the traditional educational approach in economics of lecturing and why this may not be the best approach to take would, for example, have set up the value of laying out alternatives to this approach and the issues that arise for interesting teaching in specific sub-disciplines.

This might have included a brief reference to general educational theory and evidence, and some entries from educational theorists might even have followed in the volume to further motivate and justify the pedagogical alternatives and subject-specific material that follows. This introduction might also have given some attention to the familiar arguments of the perceived trade-off in the academic profession between teaching and research that some argue accounts for the poor attention many academics pay to teaching (see, for example, Colander & McGoldrick 2009). The relationship between pedagogical approaches and pedagogical research might also have been discussed in this introduction along with the ways in which other features of the volume relate to its core material. Done well, such an introduction would have provided a much stronger opening to the book and a guide for readers about how to approach it.

In addition to its opening, a number of improvements could be made to the book’s organisation. The real heart of the book, as suggested above, is the material on teaching techniques in Part II and the course-specific issues in Part IV. This latter material is labelled as Content but the material is really about the teaching of content, not an apology (on the whole) for how content should be structured or what we should teach and what we should not teach. It would thus make sense for this material to follow closely upon the exposition of various techniques in the earlier Part II since all of this is about how to approach teaching. Much of the material in the Contextual Techniques section of Part II, in which the role of ethics, interdisciplinarity and pluralism are treated, might usefully have preceded the techniques section along with material
from some additional educational theorists. This along with the introduction suggested above, would helped to setup the conceptual framework for the book.

Part III on Research could also have been better structured. Bosshardt’s and Kennedy’s excellent chapter on econometric approaches to educational research would have nicely set the methodological tone for this part of the book and could be the first chapter. This could then be followed by the technical chapters on measurement and teaching evaluation methods, and the chapters that report major findings would then logically follow once the logic of research had been outlined.

A striking omission from the volume is the absence of any systematic treatment of methodology in the teaching of economics. Issues of epistemology and scientific methodology undergird every single idea with which we deal in economics, and yet we do not feel it necessary to explain to students at any level of their education the processes we use to decide which propositions count as economic knowledge and which do not. While there is an oblique reference to Friedman’s notion of positive economics, in the end, there is no discussion of how economic knowledge is structured in a book devoted to the teaching of this knowledge.

Lastly, and despite its title, the book is essentially US-centric. The inclusion of chapters on the UK, Australia and Germany is an excellent gesture and these entries deal with interesting institutional aspects of economics education in those countries, but this hardly makes the book “international”. The vast majority of the Handbook’s 850 pages assumes a North American degree structure and institutional environment. For some of the material, this makes little difference and the material is indeed applicable across borders. But the opening chapter, the majority of the historical chapters and most of the policy material is about North America and more particularly the United States. A truly international Handbook would consider the nature of economics in Europe more broadly, Asia, South America and Africa.

4. CONCLUSION

Hoyt’s and McGoldrick’s Handbook is a welcome contribution to the available resources for those wanting to enhance the quality of economics education around the world. In a profession that privileges the production of new knowledge, however marginal its value or true impact, it is good that those committed to teaching have more resources
at their disposal. While there is room for an improved subsequent edition, its guide to non-traditional teaching techniques, its reflection on the challenges of teaching particular courses, and its introduction to the issues and challenges of educational research in economics will be of value to thoughtful teachers and researchers in economics education.

References