

What's Worth Fighting for Learning Economics

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Change or not to change is the new challenge in education which aims to enhance the role of schools facing complexity and to raise up the cultural and organizational dimension of the curriculum for learning.

New and broader questions emerge from the economic, juridical and social issues impacting the real life of people. Thus the social dimension of Economics as Political Economy and its links with other social sciences can help students to become acquainted with learning economics and to understand related social and juridical systematic integrated issues which deal with the main pillars of our democracy.

Today, at the 22nd European Economics Education Conference, we tackle the new challenge which has been proposed: “To change or not to change, that is the question” regarding learning economics and business education in our transforming society.

Today I'm going to present to you a particular point of view regarding the question “to change or not to change”, **What's worth fighting for when learning economics? Is that a proper question to ask when speaking about change?**

Before addressing my speech let me introduce a sentence: “Political Economy, Law and Sociology are the three sciences which have tried somehow to straighten out the world, reading and thinking about its imperfection”. I have translated this sentence from Italian because I think it helps to understand my speech. In my presentation I hope to clarify the reason why I have introduced this sentence.

First of all I want to underline that I consider Economics and Business Education two different fields of education, at least at secondary school level in Italy. I think they can be linked only after having studied their specific areas of learning, and I'm going to speak of economics or better of Political Economy and its links with other social sciences. (Baccelli, 2015)

A NEW CHALLENGE IN EDUCATION: A CULTURAL APPROACH

In Aix en Provence, at the 20th European Economics Education Conference, I presented the new branch of the Italian school system regarding the study of economics: LES, the Liceo Economico Sociale (Economic and Social high school). It was 2014 and the LES national school network was trying to drive forward a systematic project of development, joining different experiences to give a shared vision of the idea of Economics, or better the idea of the interaction between Political Economy, Law and Sociology that LES proposes. The Italian branch of the Association of European Economic Education has given a very large and important contribution to the implementation of this vision, updating teachers' training

courses and supporting the idea of autonomy for LES. Yes; the question of its autonomy: at present LES is simply defined as a branch of the Liceo of Human Sciences neglecting and disregarding its cultural identity and the unicity of Political Economy as a Social Science. This is an objective limit to the recognition of its identity, its distinctive vocation and educational function. The question of autonomy goes beyond the semantic space that identifies the field of human sciences and takes on a wider connotation and systemic cultural mission in the specific field of Economic Science, Legal Science, and Sociology as cultural categories of an integrated educational environment. At the same time it identifies an educational environment, distinguished and characterized by attention to issues that are completely foreign to the educational proposal of the Lyceum of Human Sciences.

Last November the national network of LES promoted its first National Conference whose title was “Meeting political economy in order to read its cultural and sociological dimension”. The conference was held as part of the programme connected with the award of Italian Capitals of Culture, won last year by Pistoia, in Tuscany. The aim was to collect contributions from Universities and economic and cultural institutions regarding the LES learning idea. All the different points of view were collected in a White Paper. This W. P. underlines the importance of giving unicity in the Italian education system to the new integrated vision – we call it “a cultural approach” - that LES proposes reconnecting Political Economy, Law and Sociology. Next November there will be the second national conference in Palermo, Sicily (Palermo is the Italian capital of culture for 2018). Its title is “LES: A cultural crossroads in Economics, Law and Social Education”. The conference aim is to look at Economics, (the word Economics is used here to mean Political Economy), through the Economic Policy system and the social situation introduced by the presentation of the White Paper lectures. I was in charge of the coordination of the different lectures presented in Pistoia and the cultural organisation of the book; next November in Palermo my task will be to introduce the White Paper.

A NEW LEARNING ATTITUDE: THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSION OF ECONOMICS

So, while in Italy the LES school network is fighting for the new cultural vision and for autonomy, the contribution I’m trying to share with you is about the challenge “what’s worth fighting for when learning economics?” and for the role of schools facing a new dimension in education: the dimension of the democratic perspective where Economics, Law and Sociology are intended as the main pillars of that Statute of Rights which can assure the democratic interaction between equity, social justice and liberty. J. Stiglitz (2012) and Amartya Sen (2009), who are two of the major Nobel Prize winners in economics, have underlined the role of the state facing the challenge of equity, social justice and liberty.

The title I have given to my speech was inspired by “What’s worth fighting for in education” (Hargraves, Fullan, 1998): in this book they underline the fact that the aim is to make learning and teaching exciting and effective, and I’d like very much to think that Economics, Law and Sociology could become exciting and effective for our students. So, instead of starting from what is considered the traditional approach in teaching economics, why not start by considering a present day economic question or situation emerging from newspapers, reports, opinion leaders or our students’ interest.

It is evident to all observers that the economic structure of all countries is changing. This evidence forces us to define again and again the question of the economic role of the State and the global dimension of market and finance. Information and discussion about economics and equity questions have raged in the media since the 2008 crisis, so that lack of information and even disinformation and/or fake information risk to disconcert. Too many answers, too many contradictions, but the cultural role of the school can help students to face the challenge of a new learning aptitude. Complexity transforms society and, therefore, transforms the context where economics plays its role and expresses its rules. Economics is the most formalized science in terms of mathematical models; the most sophisticated but, at the same time, the most misunderstood among sciences when distinguished apart from its social and political dimension from which it cannot be separated (Morin, 2000).

Owing to the effects of the 2008 crisis “the social and political dimension of economics” is becoming in my opinion, at present, the main reason why “**it is worth**” learning Economics. Newer and larger questions emerge from reading and analysing the economic outcome of economic policy, when they are related to real economic, juridical and social issues which arise from the reality of facts, situations, events and consequences of the crisis on people’s real life and welfare. Not by chance the interview the Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz gave in 2012 was to the Italian economic newspaper Sole24Ore. He asked his colleagues to look at economics with reference to reality and not merely describe an ideal world through mathematical models. Economic questions are always at the core of discussions with reference to the effects they can bring. Economics looks at reality trying to give an answer, but lately economists seem rather to be looking at an ideal world, doubting the most considered and/or substantiated economic theories.

So after all in this framework, what about learning/teaching economics at secondary education level? Traditionally, at least in Italy, microeconomics comes first, and macroeconomics after. Micro is analysed through the neoclassic approach and macro through the Keynesian approach: can these two different approaches really help students to understand economics, or can a new chance and challenge be provided, allowing Economics to speak for real world situations in order to give an acceptable take up in solving the social and individual problems one has to face?

Malachi Pancoast, who I had the opportunity to meet at the Edinburgh University Summer School on School Leadership (SCSSA, 2008) in his “Breakthrough coach” (2016) that is training courses for improvement in school organisation, suggests and underlines that “the problem isn’t that you have yet to find the right solution, the problem is that you’re asking the wrong question”. Well, new tools and approaches are needed first of all, to find and decode the sense of the change and to understand that this is the time to learn economics enhancing the cultural, intellectual, multidisciplinary approach, enlightening the educational proposal. Economics is not any more theory or ideology: it can be read and investigated through the impact of political choices on people’s real life with reference to the political and social context where its effects are acted out. Economics is a Social Science, a Social Science that deals with History, Philosophy, Sociology, and Law, and deals with the sense of politics and with all those sciences which are trying to straighten out the imperfections of this world – clashes and troubles, links and separations of an increasingly complex, changing reality - and in the framework of change, it now deals with technology and environmental questions, but it uses the tools of quantitative analysis, to respond to changes of economic phenomena over time, and to evaluate the results on the development and quality of life.

A NEW MODERN SCIENTIFIC LEARNING AREA

In this new perspective Political Economy can be learnt at the core of an integrated scientific modern learning area. Economics is the science of choosing, Law is the science of conditions, Sociology is the science of social group interaction. This new cultural vision can help, at secondary education level, to discover the sense and the role of economics in a changing society investigating it through student guided researches and findings.

The school aim is not to tell students what to think or what to believe in, the school aim is to give them new tools to find and choose accountable information sources, allow them to understand and build a reliable view of reality starting from analysing and discussing economic, juridical and social real events, or situations. This approach aims to challenge and “rebuild knowledge” (Morin, 2001) trying to decode the world students are living in. Interdependence is one of the words to keep in mind when teaching, it helps to understand better the debate and the dialogue on the complexity of reality, on the uncertainty of situations, to provide a vision of the future while trying to avoid misunderstanding. It is a methodological vision, at the same time cultural and organizational. It helps to redefine the education proposal. It is a way to build develop and systematize knowledge around a question or a problem, and enlarge it to assess competences as a coherent system of knowledge, skills and abilities: an ongoing discovery related to the investigated reality. Areas of competence are the framework of discussion of different real life situations

and allow a progressive learning process gradually leading students to a higher level of economic juridical and sociological education, which then or after serves as a basis for further development and learning. The aim is to build deep understanding of the economic trends and their effects on social expectations related to the political and law perspectives. Having students present the arguments in a case gives them a context for developing reading, writing, and critical thinking. Mainly in Economics and Social Sciences questions about reality cannot be correctly understood from a single point of view because looking from different points of view changes the perspective and sometimes its meaning in the related context. The social point of view of welfare, or the state approach to welfare, change when linked to different interests or to different economic policies.

THE CULTURAL DIMENSION AND THE ORGANIZATIONAL DIMENSION OF THE CURRICULUM FOR LEARNING

The methodological vision of the cultural dimension is built linking teachers of different subjects around designed problems, core questions, multidisciplinary thematic topics. It is built into Units to implement a systematic and integrated approach to the question, providing tools to give through competencies, sense, meaning and vision to those learning outcomes that you expect to reach; because learning before being an issue is a process;

The methodological vision of the organisational dimension relates to a learning approach and deals with building learning results through learning strategies able to connect the learner with learning. Active student-centred learning strategies are an example, where experiences make knowledge learning, and knowledge makes experiences richer by adding new learning. Organizational learning, (Argirys Schön, 2002) Cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, 1994) Problem or project based learning (2018. Buck Institute for Education, 2018), Flipped learning (Flipped learning network, 2018), Service learning (Alternanza scuola lavoro, 2018) are some of the active students' learning education strategies that can start the process of creating leadership in education: a Leadership for learning (2018) where teachers and students cooperate together to share new learning.

We are speaking of a new curriculum for learning putting the teachers and the school transformation into action: multidisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary studies are a way of dealing with a new vision and with important discoveries and developments. **“Change is a need”**, it helps to give an answer to problems. It helps to keep students in touch with what they are learning. The cultural approach to economics is a model which helps to understand what really is happening in a changing world; it is a link between what students have already learnt and what they are going to discover and learn, when they try to give reliable and performing answers to issues covered. This progressive approach to deep learning starting from students' needs of learning enhances the dialogue with teachers of different subjects trying to build a vision of the future.

So now let me return to the sentence which I introduced at the start of my talk. I hope I have clarified my vision: only a change in teaching Economics, or better, in teaching Political Economy by a cultural, integrated approach through Law and Sociology can help our students to understand and possibly try to straighten out the world regarding its economic, social and political imperfections in its mutual interactions and dissociations.

This cultural approach to a modern new scientific learning area can provide an inner attitude which can help to understand, challenge and engage with the main pillars of our democracy: economic awareness, legal acquaintance, social guidance and reliance, political influence.

Integration of knowledge, cultural (Bruner, 1996) and organizational (Argirys Schon, 2002), refers to a sort of new revolution, (Zamagni, 2018) the one learning revolution that allows us to create a common asset of intellectual capital (Rifkin, 2014) modifying not only the learning process, but also our role within the framework of an organizational model able to create added sustainable value and values. J. Rifkin speaks about knowledge as an online integrated community of shared experiences where a new economic system is emerging for a new world; a new productive factor to share and redouble with all people who share, care and express or give voice to it. Learning is a crucial element in the process of

reducing the divergent levels of economic growth in different countries since wellbeing in life emerges mainly from technology rather than from the hoarding of capital (Stiglitz, Greenwald, 2015). Integration of knowledge implies dealing with Law, Sociology and other Social Sciences and points to a renewal of the role of the state (Stiglitz, 1992)

Let me underline that in Italy Political Economy and Law are taught by the same teacher. Economic choices depend on the decisions that the political forces take in the field of law and administration and, therefore, the proposal of an integrated cultural approach to economics can be more easily enlarged to the field of EAL – the Economic Analysis of Law (Baccelli, 2015) – which can help when planning the allocation of resources to include the surrounding legal phenomena. In the field of public law EAL refers to three different approaches:

1. **Law and Economics**, driven by the Chicago School of Economics, which deals with “the Problem of Social Costs” and the application of microeconomic analysis to emerging law problems regarding the allocation of rights.
2. **Public Choice Theory**, born in the States in the 60-70’s, which studies decision-making processes for public choices in contemporary democracies in order to obtain consensus.
3. **New Political Economy**, operating since the ’90’s, which opens the perspective to the recovery of the commanding tradition of the Public Economy which studies the institutional design of public powers and administrative skills in the implementation of public policies.

Economists may have been told that it is no longer sufficient to be simply an economist. The need is to enrich the distinctive identity of the economist with a trusted, reliable, and integrated cultural approach to the other social sciences in order to fully understand just “what is worth fighting for when learning economics”.

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