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Bringing imagination back to the classroom: A model for creative arts in economics



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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from the cognitive and neuroscience literature to develop theoretical support for the use of creative arts in college economics classrooms. The research suggests that creative arts activate important neurological pathways that aid the transfer of information from short- to long-term memory, where it can be retrieved for future problem-solving. To encourage meaningful learning and economic literacy, students must be able to mentally organize and retain information from their classroom experiences. The fresh metaphors and imagery present in creative arts such as poetry can deepen and clarify conceptual meaning, and allow students to learn and express their understanding of economics in a more personal and memorable way.

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Why I am an Economist

Because e-quil-i-bri-um is the perfect end to Haiku

Because time slows to a discount rate

at the asymptote of an hour glass

Because I am color blind to shades of gray

Because I like to tell bedtime stories to a captive audience

Because marginal costs are like shooting stars

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when it counts
 Because there are exactly seven colors in a rainbow
 Because self interest is like a cockroach
 Because there is always a right question to the wrong answer
 Because my worry lines give me away
 Because I approach the limit of creativity but never reach it
 Because a rational mind needs a pillow
 Because the market for astronauts is too small
 Because numbers are like words and functions are like stanzas
 Because efficiency is the pay dirt of a lazy mind
 Because a fortune cookie told me to 'be practical'
 and so did my advisor.¹

1. Background

Recent advances in cognitive psychology and neuroscience have greatly improved our understanding of how the human mind processes and retains information, leading to both theoretical and practical applications in the fields of education and cognitive psychology. At the same time, economists have become increasingly aware of the need for alternatives to the standard 'chalk and talk' approach to teaching economics, especially as it relates to principles courses (Becker et al., 2006). And yet, economists have largely failed to draw upon these scientific advances in learning to better adapt economics instruction to fit the needs of the modern day student (Watts and Becker, 2008). Particularly lacking is an understanding of the mnemonic potential of language to improve retention and learning (Gardner, 2011). Tinari and Khandke (2000) describe this failed connection as it relates to music, noting that 'despite overwhelming evidence that music has significant effects on cognitive processes, economists have generally not tapped into the use of music as a potential source for examples and applications in economics courses' (253). Although the lack of applied translational efforts to link cognitive psychology and neuroscience to pedagogical innovation is not unique to economics (Roediger, 2013), economists rely more heavily than other disciplines on lecture as the dominant instruction tool and have been slow to adapt over time (Watts and Becker, 2008).

A relatively small number of economists have advocated to varying degrees for pedagogical integration of the creative arts into economics classrooms, from the use of literary passages as case studies to the creation of student poetry and visual art to enhance depth of experience with the material. Although largely anecdotal, the available evidence is uniformly positive in student- and instructor-related outcomes. However, the existing literature lacks a defined theoretical basis to understand the mechanism behind these anecdotal successes. This paper seeks to fill this gap by drawing from the cognitive and neuroscience literature to understand potential pathways for the creative arts to impact memory and learning in economics.

Before reviewing the available literature and describing a theoretical model, it is useful to first consider the goals of economics instruction at the university level. What type of learning is expected of our students? This paper will assume that the underlying goal is to improve economic literacy, and to promote independent economic-based logic and problem-solving. The majority of college students will only be exposed to economics through the principles courses, and for this reason these goals are particularly relevant to the introductory sequences. In essence, we seek to train students (sometimes in as brief a period as a semester) to think like an economist. However, thinking like an economist in the real-world means that students must be able to adapt their knowledge to novel settings, which undoubtedly require a certain level of analytical imagination and conceptual creativity. To be sure, all of this assumes that the students' experience in the classroom was memorable enough to support retention of the basic problem-solving skills and concepts in the first place.

If we assume then that economic literacy in the real-world requires both creative thinking and a memory of the original concepts, it would make sense that these skills should be encouraged and

¹ Author Mary Davis, theme inspired by 'Why I Write Poetry' by Major Jackson, Ploughshares 2013.

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