Demystification of Abstraction in Economics Education

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Abstract

Many students feel that Economics is far too abstract, unrealistic and irrelevant. On the other hand, Economics teachers tend to pay insufficient heed to empirical evidence when teaching abstract concepts and theories. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the rationale and scope for the demystification of abstraction in Economics education. The author as a classroom practitioner for more than sixteen years, has realized that the majority of students studying Economics both at school and tertiary level display difficulties in grasping economic concepts. Probably this is due to the abstractness of concepts dealt with in Economics. The other contributing factor is that the majority of students lack a sound background in Economics and Mathematics. To counter these stumbling blocks there is need for Economics teachers to adopt a practical approach. It is imperative that teachers explain terms and concepts and use relevant illustrations which relate theory to real life situations. When presenting graphical illustrations and mathematical demonstrations, teachers should not rush in order to facilitate mastery of the concepts being taught. Students understand abstract concepts better if teachers employ pragmatic instructional strategies. Teaching by helping students to reflect on their day-to-day experiences promotes effective learning.

Introduction

Abstraction is a higher level of thinking which requires students to demonstrate understanding of concepts and apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired to solve real life economic problems. Economics, like any other subject, uses jargon unique to it and to make matters worse for the novice, it involves so many abstract ideas such as utility and elasticity, only to mention a few. Apart from this, Economics requires students to demonstrate mathematical skills when using mathematical models to solve economic problems. This paper seeks to discuss how teachers can address the problems that are encountered by Economics students. It will attempt to enumerate some of the challenges faced by Economics students and proffer possible solutions. When students come to the learning encounter, some may come with vague ideas of what Economics is all about and most of the content will be unfamiliar to them. Some students may feel that Economics is a rather difficult subject and others may come to classroom with a poor mathematical background. All these factors militate against the success of students in the study of Economics.
Pedagogical Approach

First and foremost, it is worth noting that for any meaningful learning to take place, learners should be ready to learn. The teacher should therefore, as is recommended by Kin and Kellough (1983), gain students’ attention before he can teach. Students’ interest can be gained by focusing their attention on what is to be taught. In view of this, the teacher should psychologically prepare his /her students to learn. He or she has to let the students know that the subject they are about to learn is an exciting one; and the teacher should show enthusiasm and interest in what he /she would have planned. Stephen and Crawly (1994:27) say, “don’t be frightened to sell to your students what an exciting subject you will be teaching them”. When this is done other things may follow naturally. For when students are fired up to learn because the prospect of doing so is exciting, they exhibit a readiness to persevere even when they encounter difficulties (Stephen and Crawly, 1994). The teacher should also make use of multimedia which may help make the subject more appealing, interesting and motivating. When students enjoy what they are doing, great things happen. One needs to be a motivator and guide and try to develop skills that have to do with learning how to learn. As independent learners students will be able to navigate the subject content even in the absence of the teacher.

Given that the material taught maybe unfamiliar to the students, the teacher should attempt to demystify the subject. It is imperative for the teacher to relate Economics to real life situations. This can be done by making students realize that the subject matter of Economics emanates from the society in which they live; and that it is part and parcel of what they see and experience on a daily basis. The teacher should duly, as advised by Perrott (1982 : 21), “provide a smooth transition from what is known to unknown material”. This calls for the use of familiar examples. For instance, the distinction between goods and services can be illustrated from what students see around them; furniture, electrical gadgets and foodstuffs (goods) and transport, haircuts and sales (services). This will ensure that students will have a lucid portrait of what will be discussed during the learning encounter. Mearman (2007) argues that students should be able to use empirical evidence to support or contradict economic theories, that is, abstract ideas and concepts need to be related to the real world. The use of realia during lesson delivery makes students interested in learning. As a result students become self propelled to learn.

The teacher should also provide learners with literature that helps them appreciate economic issues. The teacher may avail newspaper articles with pertinent economic issues, expose students to a wide range of opinions on economic issues and encourage them to listen to business news and collect articles of interest on economic issues. Literature on current economic issues provides students with an opportunity to apply theoretical concepts they have been taught in class. In news papers students can read articles on economic fundamentals such as unemployment, inflation, balance of payments, growth and development. Students may find out on their own how the government uses monetary or fiscal policy to solve economic
problems the nation will be experiencing. It will also be possible for students to suggest plausible solutions to the problems.

Closely related to the above, the teacher should also present material to be taught in proper quantity and at the proper pace to foster mastery of the concepts (Kim and Lellough, 1983). Doing so will circumvent the problem of information overload which may culminate in students being disoriented. Furthermore, the content must be logically arranged so that the students can follow the concepts taught and see the relevance of the concepts delivered to them. Doing otherwise may leave ruinous gaps in the learners’ conception of economic issues. In fact the teacher should pay particular attention to the way he or she will sequence the content. It is imperative that the teacher painstakingly prepares the lesson before hand. All learning activities should flow smoothly for learning to be effective.

Economic concepts are abstract in nature. Consequently, students may fail to grasp ideas such as utility, elasticity, the firm, supply and demand, inter alia. If not properly introduced, the student will only have a haze image of what these concepts mean. The implication is that the teacher should attempt to make use of practical examples. For example, when discussing the laws of supply and demand, foodstuffs whose supply is subject to seasonal variations can be used as concrete examples. Tomatoes and vegetables are plentiful and relatively cheap during the rainy season. In the dry season, they become relatively scarce and expensive. Such a practical illustration will at least, facilitate students’ understanding of the relationship between price and supply and or demand. Likewise, the study of national, regional and international trade can be based on tangible examples. Students can also take note of goods produced locally and abroad (imports and exports). Where it is possible, students can be taken for educational trips to border posts, where they can observe goods being taken into and out of the country. Such a practical experience enhances students’ comprehension of theoretical concepts. According to Obanya (1985:71), “examples can serve as a starting point for teaching economic concepts. It is a means by which we can reduce the ‘abstractness’ of disciplines such as ...Economics”. Becker (2004) argues that reference to empirical evidence is critical when teaching abstract concepts. Practical experience is the raw material students use to create new knowledge. When analyzing a theory students can then use empirical evidence to question the conclusions suggested by the theory. For example, the theory of demand suggests that there is an inverse relationship between the quantity demanded and the price of a commodity. Practical experience will enable students to point to the fact that there are some commodities whose demand curves are upward slopping. For such products there is a positive relationship between price and quantity demanded. Students may also question the applicability of the marginal revenue product theory in explaining the determination of wages. By reflecting on their practical experience students may realize that in the service industry it might be difficulty to measure the marginal product of a worker.

According to Kim and Lellough (1983), the teacher should not just teach definitions, principles, theories and rules but should be certain to explicate these with concrete examples that can be understood by students. For examples, in teaching production learners can be helped to relate productivity to other factors; health, availability of electricity and infrastructure
Thus, to quote Perrott (1982:22) “appropriate examples and analogues can help students to understood abstract ideas”. To complement this, what is taught in the classroom should be supplemented by adequate, related activities out of the class. This can be done through organizing clubs and societies which may carryout a wide range of activities such as educational visits and debates. Clarke and Mearman(2003) reiterate the importance of pragmatic approaches in Economics education. They argue that practical approaches encourage the development of key cognitive skills and open-mindedness in students. According to Bridges(1992) these faculties are the mark of an educated mind. Employers also look for job incumbents with such faculties. Bridges goes on to say that practical approaches enhance students’ understanding of concepts. These teaching approaches promote intellectual development, thereby enabling students to actively participate in class discussions.

In addition to the above, verbal explanations of abstract ideas should be complemented by the written explanation (Obanya, 1985). This will enable students to have a source of reference. In fact, doing so reinforces what is taught. Some students may fail to comprehend some concepts during instruction. In some cases, and where possible, the teacher should not hesitate to employ graphs and other related diagrams in an attempt to explain concepts. Here the limiting factor will be the teachers’ imagination and creativeness. The teacher who has a passion for teaching can effectively teach concepts using a variety of instructional media. The chalk board is a teaching medium whose usefulness tends to be taken for granted by most teachers, yet it can be used to make graphical presentations and to show concept development during lesson delivery. The computer is also a versatile instructional aid .It enables the teacher to use a variety of teaching strategies. For example, the teacher can make demonstrations on how to derive graphs such as revenue and cost curves. This device also permits the teacher to use simulation games as a teaching strategy. Where multivariate models are involved the computer will be handy. The author has just alluded to the use of two instructional media (one being traditional and the other modern) to show that there is a wide scope for the teacher to demonstrate creativeness in teaching economic concepts.

Economics also tends to use a language peculiar to it; and to make matters worse, it employs unique economic jargon. The students, particularly those who are less proficient in English, usually find the language of Economics a stumbling block to understanding concepts. (Oliver 1973) offers sound advice when he points out that the teacher of Economics science must arrange his or her material and choose a “language” in which to express it bearing in mind the nature of the problem and the facility of his or her students in handling that language. In other words, the economics teacher should not allow a situation where language becomes a barrier to students’ understanding. The language should be watered down to suit the cognitive abilities of the students. It also implies that the teacher should have sound subject content knowledge in order to clarify economic terms and concepts.

In addition to the above, what is taught in Economics depends on so many assumptions. The Economics teacher should therefore, strive to clarify underlying assumptions and their significance. Again, he or she has to explain terms of significance to students. The teacher must not assume that students know the terms or rush through such terms but he or she should
painstakingly clarify them. He or she may go further and prepare hand outs on economic terms so that students will always make recourse to them in times of need. Perrott (1982) says that regardless of the level of the students, the necessity of exposing learners to new facts, concepts and principles; of explaining difficult ideas; and of explaining relationships, more often than not, places the teacher in a position where he or she has to do a lot of presenting. Given this scenario, the teacher should attempt, as much as is possible, to start with examples relevant to the learners’ experiences. Where applicable, it is imperative to show the relatedness of Economics with other subjects and relate the examples to the principles being taught. For instance, when teaching the concepts of scarcity, choice and opportunity cost, it would help if the teacher refers to things that are in short supply at students’ homes and what they would buy given their budget constraint. He or she may then draw the attention of students to what they would have forgone by buying one of the two items. This may, in a way, assist the students to understand the concepts of scarcity, choice and opportunity cost.

When it comes to answering questions, students often fail to stick to the demands of the question. If they do, they usually fail to adequately support their answers with tangible facts. The teacher should therefore, try to explain words commonly used when phrasing questions. For example, words such as discuss, illustrate, assess and comment are commonly used by examiners. He or she may also prepare hand outs on key words used in setting questions. There is also need to emphasize what is expected when answering Economics questions. In addition to that it may be worthwhile to provide model answers to students so that they would be aware of what is expected. Nonetheless, the teacher should make it clear to students that they should not cram answers but learn to make their independent responses as the model answer will only be a mirror of what is expected of them.

Some students are incapacitated by a weak mathematical background. Such students fail to make sense of economic models such as the consumption function \( C = a + bY \). They find mathematical calculations a nightmare owing to attitudinal disposition. In such a case, the students need to be convinced that the calculations are simple and that they would soon master them. The teacher should not take anything for granted. He or she should provide adequate demonstration to students. For example, he or she may show students how to calculate the marginal propensity to consume and allow students ample time to practice. The teacher ought to move at a pace which enables students to follow and as much as may be possible ensure that the less able and reserved students are not left behind.

Students who meet Economics for the first time are haunted by countless problems: the unfamiliarity of the subject; uniqueness of language and economic jargon; abstractness of economic concepts, among other things. What is needed to counteract these problems is to motivate students, demystify the subject by relating it to real life situations, and explain terms and concepts; use multimedia and familiarize students with mathematical calculations and graphical presentations required in Economics, only to mention a few.
Recommendations

The teaching of abstract concepts can be effective if Economics teachers take into consideration the following suggestions:

Economics teachers should not take students’ knowledge for granted. The jargon used in Economics is not familiar to most students. Teachers should therefore, clearly explain the terms for students to grasp the concepts being taught.

Economics involves the application of theories or models in solving economic problems such as unemployment and inflation. The theories are hinged on some assumptions. Teachers should explain the assumptions to enable students to understand how the theories work. As a result students will be in a position to empirically test the theories if they understand the assumptions which underpin them.

It is imperative that Economics teachers should avoid rushing through graphical illustrations and Mathematical calculations since most students lack a sound background in Mathematics. Other students will be studying Economics for the first time.

Student participation is critical in teaching and learning. Where students are actively involved learning becomes more permanent. The implication is that Economics teachers should employ teaching strategies such as group work, field work, discovery, simulation and role playing, only to mention a few. Learning also becomes more effective where students are given more practice in the form of written exercises and tests.

Economics teachers should realize that students learn better if they have knowledge of the expectations of the syllabus for the subject they are studying. Teachers should therefore, avail students with copies of the syllabus. With the syllabus in their possession, students can read the subject content during their spare time. They can also read ahead in preparation for lessons.

Abstract concepts can also be made more concrete through the use of instructional media and practical examples. The idea is to bring reality to the learning environment. Learning becomes more effective if students are accorded the opportunity to appreciate the relevance of the subject they are studying.

References


