Unorthodox Learning For Economics Teachers

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ABSTRACT

An internet based teachers' network, Ecoteachers, has been established by economics teachers to learn from each others' expertise. Social learning requires interaction to develop shared meanings and values. In the competitive, assessment driven context of New Zealand's secondary schools, teachers do not have many opportunities to learn from each other, particularly teachers who are the sole teachers of subjects such as economics. This article suggests a complementary use of the economics teachers' network site to encourage teacher learning about the meanings and values of economics teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Scientific models idealise the characteristics of 'the expert teacher' but fail to recognise that 'teaching takes place in a communal world with shared meanings … held together by commitments to certain values' (Olson, 1992, p. 51). Good teachers also have moral purpose; a sense that there is worth in 'what is learned and the manner of its learning' (p. 51). Good teaching cannot be determined by observation alone (Olson, 1992), by collaborative work alone (Huberman, 1993), or by supervision and close monitoring alone. Teacher learning requires social interaction to develop shared meanings and values about their moral purpose.

Secondary schools often limit social interaction with teachers in their 'decoupled' or 'functionally independent' classrooms (Huberman, 1993), isolated from their workgroup colleagues. Formal teacher learning occurs as 'Professional Development'. The extent to which this enhances teacher learning is questionable given that the content, frequency and timing are usually at the discretion of the school's management (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Professional development often occurs in classroom-like settings where teachers' participation is controlled, even manipulated, to obtain predetermined results which satisfy regulatory requirements, but translate to minimal changes in teachers' practices in the real world of the classroom.

This context is particularly detrimental for those who are the sole teachers of their subject in a secondary school. They do not have the opportunity of daily interactions with other teachers of the same subject or level. Economics teachers are in this group, and increasingly so given that national statistics reveal a declining trend in student numbers from 2006 to 2008 across

externally assessed economics Achievement Standards (AS). There is also a high drop-out rate of students progressing from Level 1 to 3 (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2009a).

To help alleviate their professional isolation an economics teachers' Google group – 'Ecoteachers' – enables informal interaction over the internet. This group formed two years ago and now has 188 members; their objective is: 'To share the workload and support one another … asking each other questions and offering answers and help when needed' (Ecoteachers, 2009). Interactions take the form of requests for assistance in curriculum delivery, exchanges of resources, comments about assessments, notifications of new resources and upcoming courses. All of these certainly help teacher learning at the surface level of understanding prescribed content and assessment. However, my experience is that there is a notable absence of interactions that *question* the curriculum: what the content means for students and teachers; the form and scope of national assessment; and, how these influence teaching practices of economics teachers. It is suggested that deeper learning opportunities presented to economics teachers via this forum could help fill the void. This article describes and argues for one possible approach to encourage a more questioning approach to curriculum and assessment practices in secondary schools among economics teachers.

SOCIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

My suggested introductory posting on 'Ecoteachers' would juxtapose images of 'The Effective Economics Teacher' and 'The Effective Economics Student'. This introduction would take a Socratic approach in so far as it is designed to engage inquiry and debate in an unrestrained, non-threatening, informal setting. Proactive change for the betterment of students is promoted rather than reaction to top-down, policy-dictated change (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). The structure of the inquiry or debate is not predetermined, but is conducive to teacher learning by enabling interactions to occur in idiosyncratic ways since discussion and inquiry will inevitably proceed along different pathways. However, interspersed along these pathways there is the opportunity for participants to post critical questions, reviews and analyses pertaining to the economics curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and organisation. The interdependency of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and organisation means that there is no set order of postings. Education policy makers often treat these areas in isolation, but at the school level, they all intersect (Klenowski, 2009).

Paramount importance is to be given to the diverse identities of economics students. The challenge for economics teachers is to critically reflect on how the curriculum, assessment and their pedagogy encompass this student diversity. Economics teachers need to question their own viewpoints and identify what constitutes expertise and moral purpose in their subject. However, in relation to economics students, what constitutes appropriate economics teaching will differ according to whose perspective is taken. Given the dominant focus on secondary school student assessment, it is likely that teachers will emphasise the success criteria of the economics AS or similar embedded descriptors. This needs to be challenged.

By seeing through a student 'lens', the opportunity is provided for teachers to not only question their choice of descriptors of expertise but, more importantly, to question the absence of opportunity for students to relate and interact with the subject of economics; in other words, the absence of moral purpose in relating economics to the real world. To be an effective economics student requires both expertise and moral purpose. They differ, but are complementary. To become educated or more 'effective' as a learner, as opposed to simply being 'schooled', necessitates an approach that encompasses diversity and the recognition that there are as many student lenses as there are students.

An important question that needs to be addressed relates to the superficiality and 'tokenism' evident in how values are addressed in the economics curriculum and assessment. Values are limited to the context of economic decision-making, where 'fair dealing, honesty, integrity and consideration of others' needs [is to be considered]' (Ministry of Education, 1990, p. 13). Broader 'social, political and cultural implications' (p.13) are limited to identification (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2009b), but are not open to critique. Although this curriculum is provided as a guideline for teachers to plan programmes, the success criteria for economics AS are based on this document. Published in 1990, it reflects the dominant neo-liberal ideology and values of the time. Such values need to be questioned by asking teachers to think about the economics curriculum and assessment and consider the extent that: wealth and consumption, implied or otherwise, is a measure of social value; optimism and thinking about the future is defined in economic terms; the language of growth, prosperity, free enterprise and consumption replaces the language of 'political liberalism'; and, individual fulfilment and meaning are found in prosperity, growth and consumption (see Yarrow, 2008).

TEACHERS' WORK IN RELATION TO THESE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

New Zealand secondary school teachers have for the past twenty years experienced unrelenting education reforms. As in all secondary subject areas, economics has been subjected to assessment reform firstly with the introduction of the New Zealand Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in 2004, and then with continual changes in the content and administration of these assessments. The isolation of economics teachers within their respective secondary school environments, combined with workload escalation, has necessarily lead to a preoccupation with coping and managing these changes. Economics teaching has become increasingly assessment-driven. This can be seen as resulting from accountability pressures placed upon teachers and schools, with increased reliance on achievement and performance targets as measured by students' assessment results and teachers' appraisal objectives. Competitiveness has become a lever for improving the quality of teaching (Nuthall, 2009).

Learning opportunities, in contrast, need to increase teachers' agency, to vocalise the real world experiences they and their students face in the classroom as well as question who determines what is worth knowing. Although 'state-inspired prescriptions or reforms are often based on theoretical representations [of schools] … state craft often stands as an ersatz authoritative figure, with limited real power in the action of the classroom' (Hlebowitsh, 2009, p.17), teachers are nevertheless held to account by national assessment

results. They have been encouraged to develop a mindset that 'good' schools achieve 'good' results.

This mindset is also advanced by education policy makers' use of research to 'professionally' develop teachers in how they teach. It is claimed that 'The New Zealand Ministry of Education's best evidence synthesis [BES] iterations draw together, explain and illustrate through vignette and case, bodies of evidence about what works to improve education outcomes, and what can make a bigger difference for the education of all our children and young people' (Education Counts, 2009, p. 1). The iterations are intended to be a catalyst for systemic improvement and sustainable development in education. The BES characterises quality (economics) teaching as being focused on student achievement (including social outcomes) and facilitating high standards of student outcomes for heterogeneous groups of students (Alton-Lee, 2003). However, evidence suggests that such an approach does not improve teachers' learning, and can 'threaten the very nature of what it means to have a responsive classroom' (Hlebowitsh, 2009, p. 17) by not acknowledging the multiplicity of evidence and experience teachers draw upon in their practice. At worst, a BES approach leads to scripted teaching practice and intrudes upon teachers' autonomy and judgement. In contrast, much evidence gathered from teachers and their school and classroom environments has found them to be complex and messy. What necessarily 'works' in one setting cannot necessarily be applied to another. However, today what counts as 'student achievement' is reduced to NCEA pass rates.

Differences in the pass rates of ethnic groups in external economics AS are apparent (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2009b). All non-Pakeha ethnic groups have a pass rate below the New Zealand (NZ) European group. The average percentage difference between NZ European and NZ Māori over the five year period from 2004 to 2008 is 20 percent, and for Pasifika Peoples the average difference is 29 percent. The differences between groups in achievement percentage rates do not show convergence, rather the maintenance of similar patterns of unequal achievement. The inference to be drawn from these statistics is that quality teaching in economics, as prescribed by the BES, is not occurring; that economics teachers are therefore not sufficiently 'professionally developed' in the requirements of quality teaching.

Who is better placed to judge what and where the problems of economics teaching are than those in the classroom? Yet, in school environments where school level management endorses the BES and where economics teachers are isolated within a hierarchical structure, teachers are disempowered. Learning opportunities which promote a democratic, dialogical exchange via an established teacher network have the potential to empower economics teachers and promote ways of learning that not only release teachers' creativity and acumen, but also align with their professional beliefs derived from real life classroom experiences. A virtual learning setting frees teachers from the confines of operating within their school's hierarchy and gives them the opportunity to reflect on and develop their identity. Teacher networks do not have a well-defined structure and are difficult to put boundaries around (Schlager *et al.*, 2009). There is ample discretionary space for economics teachers to address a dilemma that is rarely confronted: how and why we teach what may not be worth knowing.

Teachers' dialogue in this learning opportunity may be random and divergent, so much so that any consensus on what subject matter should be present in the economics curriculum may not be possible. However, if students are to be equipped with 'the knowledge, skills and values to be successful citizens in the 21st century' (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 1), the traditionalist constructions of subject matter will not enable students 'to reach into their lives' (Hlebowitsh, 2009, p. 21). Teachers need to assess the extent to which the economics curriculum (and assessment) gives students the opportunity to inform decisions, behaviour, values, dispositions and attitudes in the psychological sense that Dewey promoted (Hlebowitsh, 2009). This contrasts with Dewey's 'logical' features of subject matter where facts and principles are methodically organised.

NETWORK LEADERSHIP

There appears to be a vacuum of critical reflective educational leadership (Giroux, 1996; Smyth, 1991) in economics. Economics teachers can subscribe to the New Zealand Commerce and Economics Teachers' Association (CETA) which aims to:

> - provide a forum for the discussion and consideration of all matters pertaining to the teaching and learning of … economics within the broad spectrum of education;
> - promote and stimulate interest in the study of … economics;
> - provide professional learning and development opportunities and curriculum materials for members.
>
> CETA (2011)

The Association's role is essentially that of convenor, reliant upon economics teachers to join and pursue the above aims. In contrast, an economics teachers' network has the potential to provide learning opportunities to enable economics teachers to vocalise their leadership potential in a democratic forum that encourages inclusive interaction.

Although schools are self-managing, bureaucratic regulation necessitates hierarchical structures to attach responsibility and inform performance (Ryan & Rottmann, 2009). This reality, combined with the typical isolation of economics teachers, has stifled educational leadership and the development of a subject that has the potential to play an enviable role in developing students' understanding of: (a) how economic choices are made; (b) the significance of different attitudes and values influencing these choices; and, (c) the unequal and inequitable consequences for society (Ministry of Education, 1990) in today's diverse and increasingly global world.

Economic concepts and theories, as prescribed in the curriculum remain relevant, but a preoccupation with manipulation and description of models takes precedence over critique and the real effects of economic theories. These theories and concepts inculcate a neo-liberal concept of democracy which assumes that individual freedom of choice within competitive markets (Reid,

2002) and without government intervention, accomplishes 'economic utopia'. 'Positive' economics has superseded 'normative' economics in assessment, with a lack of any judgement based on moral criteria (Easton, 2005).

It is left to economics teachers to steer students through a course that is assessed from an idealised 'one world view', but which also raises social issues of inequality and inequity. It is doubtful whether economics teachers actually address these issues given their preoccupation with the education reforms and changes that have occurred since the introduction of NCEA. This reform process has included a 'scientific' approach to professional development in the form of the BES. With the connotation that 'success' and 'leadership' are linked in some way in hierarchical structures, economics teachers have a choice of compliance (and consequently varying degrees of disenchantment) or non-compliance. Either way, the potential for critique, innovation and thus critical reflective leadership is stymied. Interestingly the BES refers to a focus on students' 'social outcomes', but this has little meaning, emphasis or importance when outcomes are reduced to NCEA passes rates.

Teacher networks offer considerable potential and power for educational leadership, although researchers admit that in large, mature, cyber-enabled networks, teacher learning and collaboration cannot be subject to rigorous analysis (Schlager *et al.*, 2009). However, research on smaller networks of professional learning communities shows that 'teacher networks … are effective alternative and supplemental interventions to traditional workshops and institutes for learning content and pedagogy' (Schlager *et al.*, 2009, p. 87). More significantly, Schlager *et al.* (2009) cite Kruse, Louis and Bryk (1995) who state that teacher networks also become 'a major rallying cry among reformers, rather than a secondary whisper' (p. 87).

'Ecoteachers' corresponds to a small professional learning community and although no research has been carried out on this group, there is research on other small teacher networks to show that they matter for school change; that teachers benefit when they talk with teachers similar to themselves, but also with teachers with whom they have less in common (Schlager *et al.*, 2009). This poses a difficulty for economics educational leadership in that the group's members are economics teachers whose voices need to be expressed freely and a 'tight' group may be more conducive to this. However, their voices also need to be heard. There is the possibility that 'bridging' will occur via members who have 'weak ties' – relationships characterised by infrequent interaction – to the group. Such 'weak ties' are wide ranging and more likely to serve as bridges across social boundaries, enhancing social capital, information flow and sustaining the well-being of society (Schlager *et al.*, 2009). Whether there are 'weak ties' in the 'Ecoteachers' group is unknown. However, strong ties within the group are evident from the extent of interaction at present.

CONCLUSION

These learning opportunities are designed 'to open doors' for economics teachers; to confront with the 'hard' questions that are rarely asked. What counts as economic knowledge? Who is advantaged and disadvantaged by the existing knowledge, and why? Its setting, apart from existing official structures, is suggested so as to encourage unbridled interaction and participation to involve economics teachers in a process of change in curriculum and

assessment; or at least the initial stages of change. Involvement develops a sense of responsibility and initiative (Klenowski, 2009), which for isolated economics teachers has been restricted by focussing on the technical aspects of curriculum and assessment change rather than the meaning and values underpinning change (Klenowski, 2009).

Professional development as prescribed by the BES needs to be analysed for the extent that measurements used to demonstrate 'what works' are not simplified or trivialised, that research has not been used selectively (Klenowski, 2009), and that 'contextual (local) grounding' is not ignored (Hlebowitsh, 2009). Questions need to be asked about whether or not this professional development is genuinely concerned with addressing the fundamental value issues in curriculum, assessment and pedagogy – not merely paying lip-service to understanding diversity and difference in the name of efficiency and management, thus potentially reproducing inequalities.

McCarthy, Rezai-Rashti and Teasley (2009) acknowledge the agreement by researchers that there is a need to move 'beyond static notions of culture and multiculturalism' (p. 77) and that 'the school is itself a site for the production of difference and not simply a point of reception' (p. 76). They caution the use of the word 'diversity' as being a proxy word that education policy makers use to 'address problems lying "deeper down" in the socius: race, class, gender, and their expression in the fundamental inequality which schooling produces within its very organisation of knowledge' (p. 77). Economics teachers and potential leaders have the opportunity to reflect on the question of diversity and social justice by engaging with the multiplicity of student identities and hopefully recognise the 'paradoxical mismatch with a school curriculum environment that still seeks to inoculate the school against this difference, insisting on a positivistic core of test taking and standardization' (p. 82).

For teaching and educational leadership in economics, there remains the challenge to develop an economics curriculum that 'enable[s] [all] students to take an effective part in economic activity and contribute to [everyone's] future economic wellbeing' (Ministry of Education, 1990). Policy-makers are not educators and need to be educated to understand that a student-centred education system that embraces diversity and difference is consistent with classical democratic values (Reid, 2002) and the principles of social justice.

Finally, trust needs to be placed in economics teachers to make professional judgements about what is best for their students. Economics teachers and leaders need to become empowered to confront the 'hard' questions and search for solutions to empower all students with an economics education that encompasses economic realities and provides for their advocacy for equality and equity.

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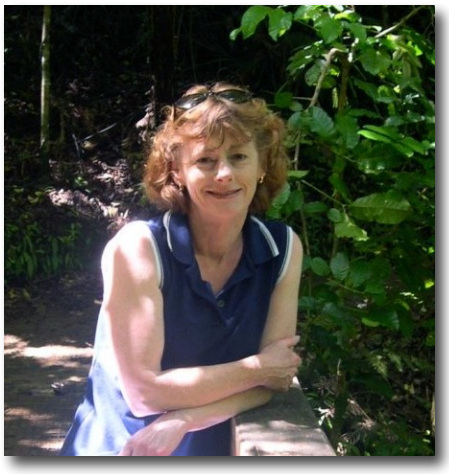

Lesley has taught a variety of subjects in many state secondary schools over many years. Originally from Christchurch, she obtained her degree, a BSc (Hons) in economics, from Canterbury University. From 2002 to 2008 she was the sole economics teacher in a low decile secondary school with an ethnically diverse student population. A study award enabled her to study full-time as an extramural student at Massey University in 2009, completing a Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Administration and Leadership, with distinction.

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