

## Discussant Comments:

*Starting Point: Teaching and Learning Economics*

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Judith Shapiro, London School of Economics

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This rich paper on *Starting Point* swiftly achieved one of its stated goals: it impelled this reader to seek out the website -- <http://serc.carleton.edu/econ/index.html> -- and chew on every blade of grass contributed there to the construction of the “teaching commons”.

When I last looked in early September, spurred by their necessarily less complete paper to the UK Economics Network of the Higher Education Academy’s annual conference in Cardiff, it seemed to me there was a lot less meat on the bones. That was true of the tantalising and very well received paper as well, which was only illustrated really with Cooperative Learning,

[http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2009/presentations/starting\\_point.pdf](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2009/presentations/starting_point.pdf)

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2009/presentations/simkins.pdf>

Thus the new paper and the enhanced site were a lift to read, and promise an important opening. I am a little hesitant to offer any criticism at all, so let’s just say that I was just a bit surprised to see that the authors do not make any mention, nor cite, of the 10-year old Economics Network, which has been pleased to feature their contributions and benefit from them directly /<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/> (See, for example, Kim McGoldrick’s pioneering <http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/handbook/ugresearch/>).

I see that the project did make use of many new possibilities to shrink the US, and it ought to be possible to do this more, even if the next years of shrinking funding, or maybe because of that. I won’t labour this tiny point. I know all the authors are keen on international collaboration and have been appreciated for their work in this for some time.

A difference I see with this initiative and the approach of the Economics Network is that the latter has as much emphasis on standard resources

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/links/othertl.htm> as on the more innovative type featured in *Starting Point* <http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/links/othertl.htm>

Given the concern - well-expressed in this paper - if we build it will they (you) come - let me simply say that it’s my best guess or working hypothesis, that it could work better for the *Starting Point* site to do some of that too. It’s true that as a pragmatic empiricist I am happy to see this eclectic mix and there may be passionate revolutionaries here who will not rest until the last lecture has really been read. Given the commitment to evidence-based innovations, it might also be useful to do more research on how change occurs, as well as whether it works.

The paper is quite clear that the mission includes an evidence-based approach to economics education. For this reason I urge everyone to study carefully the pellucid contribution by William Becker, whose allegiance to the cause of reform of “chalk and talk” is not in doubt: “Introduction to an online handbook for the use of up-to-date econometrics in economic education research” at [http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:sql-xi5j\\_6wj:www.aeaweb.org/aea/conference/program/retrieve.php%3Fpdfid%3D16+INTRODUCTION+TO+AN+ONLINE+HANDBOOK&hl=en&gl=uk&sig=AHIEtbRTOrFitMLtXn9iLZ3v7k\\_kRhAjAQ](http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:sql-xi5j_6wj:www.aeaweb.org/aea/conference/program/retrieve.php%3Fpdfid%3D16+INTRODUCTION+TO+AN+ONLINE+HANDBOOK&hl=en&gl=uk&sig=AHIEtbRTOrFitMLtXn9iLZ3v7k_kRhAjAQ)

Today’s paper has added a single screen shot of the site on Context-Rich Problems, but has almost no examples. If I could make one suggestion I hoped would help the authors in their important mission, it would be to find ways to get the potential users *first* into the examples (cases, experiments, context-rich questions) and only then to discuss the methodology, philosophy and educational psychology which produced it.

I fully understand all the pressures mitigating against such an “example →theory” presentation. The need to justify with gravity and underpin contributions in this field all militate towards production of a paper and presentation just like this. The irony is that is that this the very reverse of the learning style advocated.

There is a tension, then, between presenting this material in a suitably authoritative way in the small circles of the pedagogically devoted, and then the right tactics for getting this out to a wider audience. Such an audience will include research economists who teach, but do not find the time to stop to consider pedagogical methodology in a theoretical way – at least not until their appetites are whetted. I don’t offer an easy solution to this dilemma, but I do think that the more that progress has been made, the more that it is time to think about attracting that other audience. They are not going to stop to learn new acronyms, and need it to seem less novel, not more. Another possible dilemma, for the NSF surely funds this because it is novel.

The questionnaire results reported here indicate that there is actually quite a lot of partial progress. For a British comparison it is useful to see [http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/lec\\_survey2009.pdf](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/lec_survey2009.pdf) page 8-9 which also suggests change is occurring, interestingly much attributed to student feedback.

As a result of this partial progress I had a paradoxical impulse to think – just for a moment – that perhaps the novelty of the methods in Starting Point is really overplayed.

Then I stopped myself: That’s a common reaction when ideas make progress. There is an appropriate Russian aphorism: an idea has three stages: first beyond the pale with a few lonely disciples ; then people think “hmmm, maybe there is something in this”. Finally, the pioneers are told dismissively: of course, everyone always knew that. I think we (you) may possibly be going from phase two to a hint of phase three. The innovations really have been novel, however.

As a result of wider acceptance, however, there will be a tension. The innovators and leaders, like the authors here, understandably wish to stress the novelty of their methods. However, the most progress will be gained perhaps by doing rather the opposite.

Starting Point is being launched just we are entering a period in which *what* we should be teaching will be on the minds of leading research economists, debated in the leading economics press, the subject of conference sessions and even conferences in the next immediate period.

Instead of rivalry, the obvious approach is to make common cause: to make use of the blogosphere and the op-ed columns, as well as the links with cutting edge research. The discussion of *how* we teach will then accompany the discussion of *what* we teach.