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# Teaching popular economics to less-educated adults: principles and examples for teaching heterodox and critical economics

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *This paper aims to describe how to teach economics to adult learners, many of whom are women, immigrants and do not hold college degrees, but who feel the effects of mainstream economics — and the brunt of economic policies and the ensuing lack of services that are provided — in their everyday lives.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The article reviews popular education pedagogy and discusses and illustrates these in teaching lay audiences economics. Because they are lower-educated adult learners, different pedagogy and curriculum are needed, which involve participatory methods that clearly illustrate how different economic policies affect different economic players and how these have and can affect their lives. Many examples of these principles are discussed. Discussing alternative policies is key, and these are also illustrated. Because they discuss alternative policies, this pedagogy naturally encompasses heterodox approaches, which is also illustrated. Impediments to teaching popular economics and how this differs from traditional classroom teaching are also discussed.*

**Findings** – *When taught in the manner described, adult learners, even those with low levels of education, can learn about any economic issue or concept, including the intricacies of tax policy, the international economy, the recent financial crisis, and complex financial derivatives. With their new knowledge, participants feel empowered to take action in their communities and advocate for economic change.*

**Originality/value** – *This paper reflects on popular education pedagogy in applying and discussing issues and problems in teaching lay learners. The paper draws on the author's 20 years of experience in teaching economics to lay learners.*

**Keywords** *Popular economics, Pedagogy, Adult learners, Low-educated adult learners, Community education, Popular education, Economics, Adult education*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

In the USA, many people do not vote for political candidates who will improve their economic status and fight for their economic interests. Instead, many vote against their economic interests (Frank, 2004). Poor and low-income people will vote for politicians who advocate cutting transfer payments and services to the poor. Because people vote for political candidates based on personal appeal or on social – but not economic – issues, politicians can support economic policies that benefit businesses and the elite, who always vote and donate to political coffers, at the expense of the majority of the population and the interests of the majority of the nation.

Part the reason for people voting against their economic interests is because they do not understand economic policies and economic debates. They do not read the business news or listen to it, and even if they did so, they lack a background in economics to place this information in context. Economics is taught in a theoretical, mathematical, highly abstract way – a dismal way for the dismal science – that turns off most who attend college from

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pursuing this field. For those who never attend college, they never receive the information and background needed to understand economics and economic policies and debates.

Thus, an important component of heterodox economics is teaching non-economists about economic principles and alternative economic paradigms and policies. For the USA to shift its economic ideology away from mainstream neoclassical economics, change is important not only in academia but also within communities among non-economists. In this way support for heterodox approaches to economic problems and policies can be built. Teaching economics to lay learners has historically been important when there has been a sea-change in economic thinking and proposed policies, such as during the Populist Movement during the 1890s and during the Great Depression (Postel, n.d.; Postel, 2007; Goodwyn, 1978; Mitchell, 1987; Green, 2012)[1].

This paper will discuss teaching economics to adult learners who lack college degrees, many of whom are women and immigrants who feel the effects of neoclassical economics – and the brunt of economic policies and the ensuing lack of services that are provided – in their everyday lives. Because they are low-educated adult learners, different pedagogy and curriculum are needed, which involve illustrating how different economic policies affect various economic players and how these can affect their lives.

I have been teaching such audiences for over twenty years about the international economy, free trade, taxes and budget issues, how markets work and do not work, and the recent financial crisis. The audiences include such diverse groups as Mexican (on both side of the Texas/Mexico border) and Asian garment workers, Appalachian miners and their wives, Midwestern auto workers, and women from former USSR countries facing capitalism for the first time. I draw from my experience to reflect on popular education principles for teaching adult learners.

This paper is organized as follows. The theoretical framework for teaching adult learners is described next, followed by a more detailed examination of some of these concepts and applications of them. This essay concludes with reflections on popular economics education and its future.

### Literature on popular education pedagogy

Popular education, also known as education for social change or training for transformation, is a teaching method used to teach the poor and oppressed and to empower them through the pedagogical process (Arnold and Burke, 1983). It dates back to Paulo Freire (1970), who taught Brazilian peasants literacy by having them read and write about the concrete problems they were experiencing (Arnold and Burke, 1983). After discussing the problems they were collectively facing, they took action in their communities to improve their conditions.

Freire believed that students should be active in their own learning, including determining what the content and process should be, rather than passive vessels in which a pre-determined body of work is poured into them by experts. Students, he believed, bring their own knowledge and experience to their learning process, and teachers need to understand their students, including how they comprehend the world and learn in order to determine how to teach them. Teachers learn as much as students; each learn from each other, and together teacher and students create new knowledge (Freire, 1970). With their new knowledge, students take action to transform and improve society, changing power relations to be more equal and improve the lives of the oppressed.

Popular education techniques evolved from Freire's work by nonprofit groups and educators who taught the poor or oppressed in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s (Arnold and Burke, 1983). These techniques were used in the Caribbean and Africa during the 1980s in order to understand the consequences of structural adjustment policies on these populations, and in the USA and Canada beginning in the 1980s in order to understand deindustrialization, job losses and changes in economic policies,. The techniques and process followed Freire's precepts to respect the participants, involving them in planning the

curriculum, having participants be equal to the trainers, and making the learning experience participatory, fun, and relevant to their lives (Arnold and Burke, 1983; Arnold *et al.*, 1991). In the USA, labor educators used similar pedagogy to teach workers, especially in labor schools and union trainings (Martin, 1995).

Popular educators today continue to adhere to these concepts, which involve the following (Arnold and Burke, 1983; Arnold *et al.*, 1991; GATT-Fly, 1983; VeneKlasen and Miller, 2007; United for a Fair Economy, n.d.)[2]:

- *Respecting the learners.* Popular educators believe that the participants have their own knowledge and bring much insight to the topic and their learning process. Pedagogical techniques honor the existing knowledge of the learners by taking this into consideration, as well as their needs. Participants teach the teachers as much as the teachers teach the learners. Popular education begins with the experience and knowledge that participants bring and adds to this.
- *Participatory learning.* Many techniques use small groups and group discussion, as well as learning methods that are visual and fun: role plays, skits, art, drawing, music and other techniques that use sensory or physical activity involving the group. Ideas for applying these to economic issues are discussed in the next section.
- *Praxis.* Education is intended for action, and popular educators believe in undertaking collective action to change the socioeconomic conditions of the oppressed.

The rest of this essay examines some of these concepts in more detail and applies them to teaching economics to adult low-educated learners. Although I use all the above concepts when I teach, because of space considerations, I concentrate on the second aspect listed—participatory training methods. I also include suggestions for integrating heterodox perspectives in the teaching methods and reflections on teaching economics using these popular methods.

## **Applying popular economics pedagogy to teaching economics to adult low-educated learners**

### *Learn about participants and their world*

Teaching economics to adult learners requires that the trainer learn about the particular institutions, actors, and power relations in the audiences' communities in order to understand what issues to address and how to approach these. The institutions, economic issues and power dynamics are different for women in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan who are transitioning from a Soviet-Type to a market type economy in the early 1990s than those for coal miners in Appalachia, garment workers on either side of the Texas/Mexican border, or unemployed auto workers in South Chicago. Popular economics educators thus must research the industries and geographic areas of their audience in order to understand the economic issues that are affecting them. From this information, one can determine the economic concepts and issues to address and create new curriculum and pedagogical techniques that will illustrate the relevant economic issues and their particular manifestations in these communities[3].

Thus various audiences learn about the economic issues most pertinent to them. Communities transitioning from Soviet-Type economies learned about the various ways capitalism can be instituted, with varying levels of government involvement and social services and safety nets, so that the participants could advocate for having more market socialism than *laissez-faire* capitalism. Garment workers learned about free trade agreements and the effects they would have on their jobs and communities, and unemployed auto workers learned about the international economy and how it had changed so that jobs were leaving their communities. Workers in many communities today want to understand the financial crisis and the Great Recession and how government policy can avoid these in the future and help those who are suffering from the recession's aftermath.

### *Use participatory, visual methods to teach*

Popular educators use participatory, visual illustrations that foster much interaction because they believe that learning occurs better when more senses are engaged (e.g. visual and auditory) and when there is more participation involved (Arnold and Burke, 1983; Arnold *et al.*, 1991). When discussing economics, however, it is important to understand that using visual, participatory methods are imperative in order for many audiences to comprehend economic concepts, theories, and issues. Without them, it is often difficult for general audiences to learn economics.

Key to understanding this is acknowledging that people learn in different ways. Many of those with college or graduate degrees need to hear about statistical studies and what the research says about economic issues and policies. Many of those without higher education levels become bored when discussing these studies. For those with lower education levels, many learn economic concepts if these are clearly illustrated visually so that they can relate them to their own experiences.

For example, when inequality accelerated in the 1980s, ordinary people did not understand it, despite this topic being discussed in the business section of newspapers. Lay people did not understand what it meant that the top 1 percent of families owned 90 percent of net wealth. If one lectures on this phenomena and shouts this statistic over and over, the average person would not understand how great the disparities were. But instead, if you show them the disparities in wealth, they can understand it. You can do this by setting up ten chairs in a line and having ten people sit in them. Ten people represent the entire population of families, and ten chairs represent the entire net wealth of the country. If everyone sits in a chair then wealth is distributed equally. But if you show them that in reality one person receives seven chairs, three receive three chairs, and six have nothing and have to leave their chairs and stand along the side, the audience comprehends how unequal wealth distribution is in America.

This illustration that I first used in 1989 has been replicated all over the USA to illustrate inequality in wealth. One stark example conveys simple statistical facts in ways that everyone can understand. One can use this illustration to discuss income and wealth distributions over time (by showing how the distribution of chairs has changed), how social policies have affected these (e.g. minimum wage, union coverage, Social Security, funding for education), discuss who owns how much and why, and show the results of alternative policies on the distribution of wealth by rearranging who owns how many chairs. Through this illustration, participants can discuss what policies they would propose for an economic agenda of America and organizing strategies to shift economic policy.

Other graphic illustrations can help people understand similar policy alternatives – including human bar charts to illustrate the federal budget. Place chairs in lines of different lengths and have people sit in them – some sit in a line of only one chair, others sit in long lines of several chairs. Have participants guess which line represents education, welfare, and military defense. Participants can discuss in small groups how they want the budget changed, how this would affect their communities, and organizing strategies to reach these goals.

One of the more illuminating illustrations involves tax policy. One can discuss the purpose of taxes (raise money, equalize income, change behavior) and the types of taxes (income, sales, user fees), as well as their effects (changing behavior, equalizing income) and then have participants discuss how they would change tax policy (more progressive, less progressive, flat tax). But invariably participants often thought that a flat tax was fair because everyone paid the same amount from their income. After all, should not everyone pay the same percentage?

To show that the effects of a flat tax affected lower income people disproportionately, depict three different families from high, middle and low incomes, by having three separate felt boards covered with photos (attached with Velcro) of what each family purchased from their incomes – their homes or apartments, a summer home and country club membership for the wealthy family, tennis lessons for the upper and middle families, food, clothes (more

designer brands for the wealthy family), savings, entertainment, vacations, and college tuition. Ask the audience how the progressive, regressive and flat taxes would affect each family – what they would take away from each. In this way the audience could clearly see that by having flat or regressive taxes, one takes away necessities, such as food or clothes, away from the lower income family, whereas they are taking away vacations or savings from the middle or higher income families – items which are nice but not necessary for a decent standard of living. The result is that the audience could understand that people occupying very different economic strata are affected differently from the same policy, and that reducing away savings or inheritances of the affluent is very different from taking away food or shoes from the poor.

To discuss employment and labor policies, construct a jobs pyramid so that the audience can visualize the effects of various policies on different workers. Place a chair on a large table and have one person (give this person a hat) sit in this chair atop the table. Two people sit on the table itself, on either side of the chair, constituting the middle level (give them ties and calculators). Nine or ten people sit in front of the table in chairs. Visually, you now have a pyramid with three levels of job holders. You can talk about who is on each level of the pyramid and how they got there. Those on the bottom will include janitors and fast food workers and will have lower education levels. Those in the middle will be professional workers and have college educations. Those on the top are CEOs and high level executives, who also have college educations and most likely, MBAs. You can discuss the difference in pay among these workers and how they have changed over time, for example, how the college premium has grown and how executive pay has skyrocketed, and why.

You can then discuss different policies and how these alter this jobs hierarchy. For example, the minimum wage increases wages at the bottom. Increasing unionization rates would have a similar outcome and would give these workers a voice regarding their working conditions. Increasing education and training opportunities, however, allows mobility from the bottom chairs to those sitting in the middle. Caps on pay and increased taxes on the wealthy with concomitant increases in social spending would benefit those at the bottom at the expense of those on the top.

All of these illustrations use a visual picture to convey powerful messages – of how much money is spent in the USA, to the detriment of others; of how much one group owns or earns relative to others and why. To illustrate more complex relationships among different economic actors, and especially how diverse economic sectors interact with each other in an international economy, a role play is an effective tool. Role plays involve reciting a script that describes economic concepts or issues and assigning various roles to different audience members in order to illustrate these[4].

This technique lends itself to international themes and to showing the different roles of economic institutions. It also starkly illustrates the effects of economic policies or activities on different people. It is effective in illustrating the Great Recession and financial crisis, which involves many participants: a bank, a mortgage broker, home buyers and sellers, investment banks that buy the mortgages and repackage them into mortgage backed securities and CDOs, investors such as a Teachers' Pension Fund, Deutsche Bank, Societe Generale, a credit rating agency such as Moody's, several businesses such as a restaurant, a travel agency, a jewelry store, a car dealership and a hardware and a home goods store.

This role play involves showing participants how loans create money because of reserve requirements being less than the amount of obligations in banks, and how monetary policy can affect the economy. Participants receive loans and spend them in the various stores, and they enjoy thinking of how they would spend \$40,000 or more – fixing their houses, taking a long overdue vacation, going to restaurants, or buying a new car. The businesses receiving this money then deposit money in the bank (which is then lent out again) and hire more workers. The workers receive incomes that they put in the bank or they spend their incomes on vacations, cars, jewelry, or fixing their homes. In this way participants learn how lending and loose monetary policies heat up the economy and led to the hot economy of the 2000s before the financial crisis.

Participants then learn how mortgages were bought by investment banks, repackaged and sold as mortgage backed securities or repackaged again as collateralized debt obligations, how credit ratings agencies rated these as safe without looking through them, and how companies like AIG sold credit default swaps to insure them. They can see the house of cards – how much of the financial obligations were not backed up with capital – and how once the market started falling, why financial institutions fell as well. They can also understand why credit froze, money froze and with consumption falling, why we fell into the Great Recession.

By illustrating this story, with many different players across an international landscape, participants learn many concepts such as capital requirements, reserve ratios, and financial instruments such as bonds, CDS, MBS, and CDOs. More importantly, they can understand the economic debates about policy and formulate their own opinions about them. In doing so, they discuss *laissez faire* economics, in which the banks and hedge funds were allowed to undertake risky behavior versus regulating markets to reduce society's risk.

### ***3. Discuss alternative economic policies and alternative economic paradigms***

An important component in this pedagogy is having participants discuss alternative policies, so that they can discuss alternative economic paradigms. To do this, pose questions for them to discuss in small groups. For example, for the financial crisis, ask them to discuss where they think the stimulus money should have gone and what economic/financial reforms they would propose to prevent another financial crisis. List some of the policy proposals (breaking up banks so they are not too big to fail; having the government take over financial institutions; having the government regulate financial institutions (and how); having the government help homeowners who cannot make their mortgage payments; bailing out the banks, as we did; and having the government buy some of the toxic housing assets) so they can discuss these options as well as others that they want to propose. In this way they can discuss the current policy options as well as any others they can think of and decide what policies they want to advocate.

After participants discuss these questions and policy options in small groups, the entire audience hears what participants favor, and why. They often do not agree among themselves, and it is not important to reach a consensus. What is important is that they debate economic alternatives, see the pros and cons of the debate, and decide on which side they fall. It is only when ordinary people feel empowered to articulate their economic priorities that we can promote and achieve alternative, progressive economic policies.

One illustration specifically explains market fundamentalism and invites discussion about whether or not the economy works this way. Divide the audience in half and inform them which half are consumers and which half are producers. Give all of the producers napkins with a few potato chips on them, and tell them that all the potato chips are the same and that there are plenty of producers. Tell the consumers that they need to buy potato chips and the producers that they have to sell them in order to make money. Then have them simulate a bourse, where producers shout out the prices for which they are willing to sell and consumers shout out if they are willing to buy at these prices, and if not, at what price.

Next, discuss the prices that were agreed on (usually one price or a narrow band of prices is predominant), and the role of prices in clearing markets, and how the profit motive acts to keep producers from charging too high a price to consumers. You can illustrate how invention occurs by giving one producer barbequed potato chips or some other flavor (such as salt and vinegar) and show how this producer will receive higher prices and hence higher profits (invariably a consumer will buy these at a higher price than the plain potato chips) if they are able to invent a product or service that customers need, and in this way the market produces what consumers want.

The objective of this exercise is to illustrate market fundamentalism and the assumptions behind it, as well as the policy implications. Point out that there is no government policy required in this economy and hence *laissez-faire* economics. It is important to break the audience up into small groups and ask them if the economy works this way, and why or why

not. When the groups re-convene and after sharing their answers, discuss when this model is more and less relevant (which markets are more and less competitive), and the role of government when the economy is not competitive – i.e. having the government regulate firms and industries, including anti-trust activity. Also discuss the role of government in providing public goods, services that have positive externalities (education, health care, services for the disenfranchised), and regulating industries to minimize negative externalities such as with environmental protection, health and safety, and labor and employment laws.

In this way the audience can understand the role of government *vis-à-vis* private industry. For audiences that want to examine this in more detail, you can provide a separate training on privatization[5]. With or without the privatization segment, the market fundamentalism training lends itself to critiquing a market fundamentalist approach because the audience thinks about whether the theory is valid in their lives (and where). Where it is not applicable or valid, they discuss what alternative economic policies would improve their communities.

#### *4. Praxis: action through learning*

Do not be surprised if participants shout out, “What can we do about this?” Have a component built into the training to answer this question, and move this segment up if participants are fired up early to discuss this. Popular economics education can be used as catalysts to determine what type of actions to undertake, to mobilize disparate organizations and constituencies, or to shift political or organizational foci or strategies. Most of the trainings I have performed were commissioned by organizations to accomplish one of these goals.

For example, an advocacy organization in New York had focused on microenterprise and wanted to change their direction towards organizing around economic development issues that would transform the community. But they needed help educating the staff and their Board in order to switch their organizational focus. Few popular educators liked this economic strategy of microenterprise because it is an individual one (people begin small businesses in order to rise out of poverty) instead of a collective strategy that aims to change power relationships and the economic structure. The jobs pyramid was designed for them, and microenterprise was portrayed as a separate chair away from the pyramid—and not changing the wage or job structure but allowing the status quo to continue. In this way the participants saw that their current strategy of microenterprise accepted the economic structure and did not challenge it, and they discussed alternative economic development strategies that they could pursue that would change economic power relationships. In the end, they pursued much broader economic strategies to develop their communities.

Another organization in California commissioned training for garment workers in order to motivate them to improve their economic conditions (until then, the workers had only a social organization that met to eat and to socialize). This training involved details about the garment industry and how out of their ten hour day, the first 12 minutes went towards their wages – everything else went to profits for subcontractors, contractors, or manufacturers. This training resulted in the workers organizing and leading a boycott of a garment manufacturer and discussions with a labor union. It is still today to educate garment workers.

Both examples illustrate how increased knowledge about the economy can ignite workers to organize to improve their lives or result in changing strategic focuses of community organizations in order to meet the needs of the community. In another example, a women’s organization wanted many disparate women’s organizations in the state to work towards an economic agenda for women. Using a drawing technique (GATT-Fly, 1983), these organizations articulated the economic problems women faced, the sources of these problems, and the policies that could remedy these problems, as well as allies they could work with towards that agenda. In this way, the popular economics teachings were used to identify and work towards common economic goals across many different organizations.

## Reflections on popular economics pedagogy

### *Heterodox economics*

Compared to academic economists and college students, lay audiences are more likely to gravitate towards heterodox economics, because alternative economic approaches and views more accurately portray the lives of the general public, and especially low-educated learners. The audiences I trained easily learned about heterodox economics. They intuitively understood notions of power, the interests of capitalists versus workers, and that they were the powerless. I simply had to teach heterodox policy ideas and tools and they quickly understood these. Having a process in which alternative views and policies are introduced in each training session leads to teaching heterodox thought and alternative economic policies.

For example, in teaching participants about free trade, discuss the theory of comparative advantage and how that justifies free trade. Then discuss some of the provisions in NAFTA and the WTO, such as national treatment, trade related intellectual property and technical trade barriers, and how these are leading to loss of sovereignty and limitations on nations regarding environmental and health and safety protections. Participants are quick to understand that many provisions in trade agreements help corporations and hurt workers and communities, and that with alternative provisions in these agreements, as the EU has, plus safety nets, workers and communities could be strengthened instead of weakened. Participants see, in other words, that economic trade agreements and policy are political and help certain segments and countries more than others, and that political power is important in determining economic policy and thus outcomes.

In teaching about jobs and wages using the jobs pyramid, participants can understand that by limiting options for mobility (through affordable education), those with wealth can easily retain their socioeconomic status, while those at the bottom of the pyramid fight among themselves for the few jobs in which they can be employed. In contrast, by increasing jobs (such as by the government hiring as a last resort) and wages at the bottom of the hierarchy, workers can have more power and are more likely to organize to improve their employment conditions.

Teaching economics to adult learners results in pedagogical issues and problems that are very different than those one faces when teaching in formal classrooms. Instructors do not have to bring the “real world” into the classroom, since the participants are keenly aware of how economics affects their lives. Instead, I often have the problem of telling them that many economists believe neoclassical theory and *laissez-faire* economics and that is why we have the economic policies we have today – which allow for relatively free markets and fewer safety needs and social provisions compared to other advanced nations. Audiences are quick to understand that markets do not work perfectly, that they are low-paid not because they are unskilled or unproductive but because they are women, immigrants, people of color, and politically powerless. They are often amazed that anyone would believe neoclassical economic theory, as their reality is so different from academics and PhD-holding economists, and they often wonder why I teach in a field that holds such ridiculous beliefs.

### *Audience reactions and paradigm shifts*

Audiences react in different ways to workshops, and I can never predict this in advance. Sometimes they are angry and outraged and immediately want to discuss what to do. Sometimes they feel refreshed – ordinary workers know when they are getting screwed – and when someone confirms this and explains to them what is going on, why and how, they feel better. Most feel excited that they can understand and learn economics if the subject is explained and illustrated to them in the ways described, and they talk to their friends about what they have learned and begin to listen to the business news. No one leaves feeling apathetic about economics anymore or feeling that economics or the business pages does not affect them.

Many are shocked to discover that their beliefs are incorrect: that inequality is worse than they thought, that the taxes they were opposed to (income taxes) would reduce inequality

more than the taxes they had favored (users fees or flat taxes), that government spending does not go to the poor. Workers discover that the La Mans Pontiac they bought and thought was made in the USA was made offshore. Those who blamed immigrants for taking their jobs learn the intricacies of the international economy and that immigrants and workers abroad are competing for jobs with workers in the USA that easily move to lower-priced countries. Workers who favored Reaganomics and supply side economics realize who benefitted from these policies – and that it was not them. Others are surprised to discover how unequal wealth is, how little mobility exists in the USA, how tax policies keep money abroad once corporations go offshore, and that workers abroad suffer even more than they.

Before these trainings, workers often believed what they were told or what they heard from others or on talk radio. Much of these economic policies were against their own economic interests. With their increased awareness, they re-think their views and articulate economic policies that are more beneficial for them and for their communities. They discuss collective actions that can result in achieving these new economic policies that may involve working with communities and workers abroad rather than competing with these for jobs and resources.

### *Problems in opposing class interests*

Although many of the problems with teaching in formal traditional classrooms are avoided, there has always been one major obstacle in teaching popular economics from a heterodox view to empower oppressed communities – that of agency (Susman, 2009). Institutions are often limited in their grant funding to resolving limited problems, imposing particular remedies, or to providing services or aid, rather than advocacy and transforming consciousness (Susman, 2009).

The non-profit agencies with which I have worked were dependent on receiving grants. But major funders, often rich benefactors and wealthy corporations, would often pull their funding – they did not want to oppose their own class interests. This happened in two organizations in which I was involved. In the first, a major corporate funder told the NGO to restrict the activities of the two staff members conducting economic training so that the latter could not perform this work. The staff resigned from this nonprofit organization and started their own. Because few wealthy donors and foundations are willing to fund economic training that empower the working class to advocate for their class interests, raising money to undertake this work was always a struggle for this organization, which no longer exists. In the second example, a wealthy donor withdrew her support for activities that involved reducing inequality – she clearly knew her class interests. Since this organization was dependent on her money, it quickly switched its focus from reducing inequality to education, the latter a relatively safe subject.

Thus organizations can provide popular economics education if they have independent funding or are subsidized by universities or other institutions that can oppose the interests of the wealthy and powerful. Such organizations include labor unions, which have flourishing adult education programs that include popular economics trainings. Some religious denominations, such as the Methodists, have also included popular economics education to their members. Others, however, like labor education programs in universities, are often under attack and at risk of losing their funding because of the political and economic perspectives they advocate. Thus because so few institutions are able to be financially independent, and because the popular education trainers must provide these activities pro bono or at a revenue loss, popular economics education has remained much smaller than its potential.

Yet the future for popular economics is bright. The Occupy movements demonstrate that part of the general public has widespread interest in economic issues and are unhappy with current economic policy. Many heterodox economists have been teaching economics at these places, with some using popular education techniques. The Occupy movements, should they continue, can become a catalyst for teaching communities economics and for having economists and community activists lead the teachings. Over 20 years ago, when I first began teaching communities about economics, I had to convince the audience that there was a problem with Reaganomics and that supply side economic policy was hurting them. Today,

most participants know there is a problem with economic policy and that many workers are hurting and are not reaping the rewards of the international economy. They are eager for alternative economic policies and heterodox approaches. What is needed is the capacity to teach these populations economics using methods that respect them, involve them in their learning process, and illustrate economics in clear, lively, participatory and fun ways. With such capacity and techniques, widespread learning of economics can occur, such as during the Populist era, and alternative economic policies can be mandated by the general public.

## Conclusion

When I first began teaching economics to low-educated adult learners, I was told my approach was like Freire (1970). Indeed, my motivation, to empower common people through popular education to speak out about economic issues and agitate for economic change, is indeed similar to Freire (1970). But much of my pedagogical technique, although similar, was not based on reading Freire (1970), whom I only recently read. Instead, it was based on common sense and from my own understanding, having grown up in similar communities, of how low-educated adults learned best. People cannot understand concepts unless these are explained clearly to them and in a way that makes economics relevant to their lives. They also cannot learn if they are not listened to or respected.

Using the various techniques described in this essay can convey complex economic relationships clearly. Most importantly, respecting the integrity of the process is critical: allowing participants to think for themselves about which policies they favor, and allowing for disagreement among them is key.

If one follows this technique, there is no limit to what audiences can learn, and they can indeed understand the intricacies of tax policies, trade policies, exchange rates, the international economy, structural adjustment policies, privatization, the federal budget, deficits, debt, the recent financial crisis, and the complex financial derivatives and financial institutions that brought the global economy to its knees and into the Great Recession. Economics can always be explained in ways in which everyone can understand it. And this is critical to democracy and to heterodox economics.

Once they have the economic knowledge and confidence, audiences feel empowered to advocate for economic policies that can aid their communities, and many of the organizations I have trained indeed used their newfound economic knowledge to push for women's economic agendas in their states, alternative community economic development strategies, and organizing for more pay, among many other activities. It is only after ordinary people understand economics that we can truly have heterodox economic theories accepted more broadly, and with this, alternative economic policies can become the norm.

## Notes

1. The Populists educated communities about political economy in order to build support for their economics platform. This platform included government ownership of railroads, telegraphs and telephones; abolishing national banks, graduated income taxes, protections for workers, and the eight hour working day. Support for this platform included discussions of monetary theory and expanding the monetary system by coining more silver as well as discussions of political economy (see Postel, n.d.; Postel, 2007; Goodwyn, 1978). During the Great Depression, labor and union schools taught economics to ordinary workers (Green, 2012). (Green is a Professor of history and labor studies and is a labor historian.)
2. See their training manuals and discussions about their training philosophy.
3. This differs from Arnold and Burke, 1983, and Arnold *et al.*, 1991, who have specific training material (such as learning techniques) that they apply to their audiences. With these popular educators, they must understand how the topic discussed applies to their audiences. With popular economics education, it's more powerful to consider all the economic issues that participants may be experiencing in order to determine the topic, so much knowledge about their circumstances help determine this.

4. These role plays differ from those used by other popular educators (Arnold and Burke, 1983; Arnold *et al.*, 1991). The participants originate and construct the role plays used by these other educators. In the role plays I use for popular economics, I originate the role plays in order to illustrate interactions among various players in the economy. Thus they are used so that participants can understand economic relationships and concepts.
5. This begins with participants discussing in small groups whether transportation for senior citizens should be delivered by: contracting out to a nonprofit agency; contracting out to a for-profit company; hiring public employees and using public vans; or offering vouchers to senior citizens so that they could use these towards taxi or bus services. After hearing what the groups decide, the trainer defines and discusses privatization (sales of public assets such as parks and airports; contracting out services such as prisons; providing vouchers by the government to purchase services in the private sector, such as with schools; passive privatization – government curtailing its enforcement role in areas such as health and safety, or labor or non-discrimination laws; and deregulation, including why airlines and utilities were once regulated but then became deregulated).

The trainer can then examine some criteria to consider in determining whether the government or the private sector should provide the service, and if the service is privatized, in which way. These can include access to the services (such as airlines and buses), accountability and mechanisms for accountability, the quality of jobs, the quality of service, and externalities such as safety. The assumption that the government is inefficient and that the private sector is more efficient is discussed, as well as other criteria for evaluating who should provide services, given that the cheapest service at the lowest cost may not be in the country's best interests.

Participants should be provided a list of services and discuss in small groups which should be provided by the government and which privatized (and if the latter, in which way). These services can include the Post Office, prisons/jails, nuclear reactors, detention of illegal immigrants, security at airports, sewage treatment, school bus service, freeway construction, day care, power plants, juvenile facilities, security at the Pentagon. These discussions, and the group discussion that follows, can discuss the criteria listed above and how to best ensure accountability, safety, job quality, quality of service, etc. It can update participants regarding which services have been privatized and which are under discussions of becoming privatized.

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## About the author

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