

https://dspace.org/

On teaching economics 1: a qualitative case study of a South African university

Ojo, Emmanuel Oluseun

2016

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/20757

Ojo, Emmanuel Oluseun (2016) On teaching economics 1: a qualitative case study of a South African university, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/20757>

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

ON TEACHING ECONOMICS 1: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

Emmanuel Oluseun OJO

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in fulfilment of the conditions for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Main supervisor: Professor Shirley Booth
Co-supervisor: Professor Lorenzo Woollacott

April 2016

ABSTRACT

The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 changed the way the world thinks about economics as a discipline and brought about awareness of how economics is taught at universities. In view of an on-going global debate about the economics curriculum and its teaching, this doctoral study places the South African context within the global higher education sphere and explores how introductory economics is taught in first-year at a South African university. This study explored the teaching of Economics 1 at a mainstream, globally-ranked public university in South Africa with very similar content and structure to the Economics 1 curriculum in the West.

The main aim of the doctoral study was to investigate the qualitatively different ways in which university teachers (lecturers and tutors) teaching Economics 1 at a South African university conceive of, experience and understand their teaching and tutoring roles. On the basis of this, three research questions were asked: (I) What are the qualitatively different ways in which lecturers at 'the University' understand teaching Economics 1?; (II) What are the qualitatively different ways tutors at 'the University' understand teaching Economics 1?; *and* (III) What is/are the implication(s) for students' learning of teaching Economics 1 within the current setting at 'the University' through the lenses of relevant conceptual frameworks and the outcome of the empirical study?

Teaching in higher education, the disciplinary context of economics' undergraduate teaching and its implications for students' learning underpinned the choice of the literature, the three conceptual frameworks and the research methodology. By asking the three research questions above to guide the research process, the empirical study used a qualitative methodology – phenomenography – that aims to explore the qualitatively different ways in which a group of people experience a specific phenomenon, in this case teaching Economics 1 in higher education. On the basis of phenomenography as a conceptual framework in itself, this doctoral study further analysed the empirical data using two conceptual

frameworks - a four-context framework for teaching in higher education and the concept of semantic gravity, relating to segmented and cumulative learning, as conceptual lenses.

Two sets of conceptions of teaching emerged on the basis of answering the first two research questions. A careful, comparative analysis of these two sets (lecturers' and tutors' sets of conceptions of teaching) led to six conceptions of teaching Economics 1 in higher education as follows: (I) team collaboration to implement the economics curriculum; (II) having a thorough knowledge of the content; (III) implementing the curriculum in order for students to pass assessment; (IV) helping students learn key economics concepts and representations to facilitate learning; (V) engaging students through their real-life economics context to acquire economic knowledge; *and* (VI) helping students think like economists.

The first three are characterised as being teacher-centred and the later three as student-centred. Applying the concept of semantic gravity (Maton, 2009), I argue that the latter two more complete conceptions of teaching imply cumulative learning in which students are able to acquire higher-order principles whereby they are able to apply the knowledge acquired through the teaching of Economics 1 in new contexts. The first four conceptions are seen as favouring segmented learning. According to this analysis, the fourth conception, although characterized as student oriented, should be regarded as favouring segmented learning which is not in line with the aims of higher education. As for the four-context model of teaching in higher education, the analysis from the empirical data showed that there is a very strong connection between the pedagogical and disciplinary contexts in relation to the six conceptions of teaching emerging from the analysis, though the disciplinary context is stronger than the pedagogical context.

In summary, three implications can be drawn from this doctoral study on the basis of the empirical data, literature and conceptual frameworks as the basis for

improving undergraduate economics education. These are as follows: (1) the need to make the economics curriculum aligned with real-life contexts of undergraduate students; (2) the need to rethink the economics curriculum in light of the current global debates within the discipline of economics; and (3) the need to bring pedagogical development into the team.

Key words/phrases:

- Conceptions of Teaching;
- Teaching in Higher Education;
- Higher Education Research;
- Undergraduate Economics Education; *and*
- Phenomenography