

## Assume Anarchy: The Educational Philosophy of Peter Boettke

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### Abstract

Kneller (1984, 1978, 1971) identifies four major theories of education: progressivism, perennialism, essentialism, and reconstructionism. No particular theme fits my mentor, Peter Boettke, particularly well. In fact, Boettke's educational philosophy can best be described as educational anarchism, and his educational philosophy comes from his understanding of economics. We would never want a one size fits all, "top down" approach applied to the economy as a whole. By the same logic, why would we ever want to impose a one size fits all standard on something as diverse as a student body? Boettke's method, which can also be summarized as a "just do it" method, is sensitive to his different students and relies on local knowledge of time and place. The article describes educational anarchism and explains how Boettke has effectively applied educational anarchism in practice.

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Don't be astonished, Miss Taggart, and don't make the mistake of thinking that these three pupils of mine are some sort of superhuman creatures. They're something much greater and more astounding than that: they're normal men – a thing the world has never seen – and their feat is that they managed to survive as such. It does take an exceptional mind and a still more exceptional integrity to remain untouched by the brain-destroying influences of the world's doctrines, the accumulated evil of centuries – to remain human, since the *human* is the rational.

–Hugh Akston speaking to Dagny Taggart in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*

## **I. Introduction**

Feyerabend (1975) makes the case for an “anything goes” philosophy of science. According to Feyerabend’s analysis of science, methodological anarchism guarantees scientists absolute liberty, and absolute liberty in scientific inquiry is crucial for the advancement of knowledge and progress. As Feyerabend illustrates, scientific “standards” at a particular moment in time are often in place to prop up and protect the prevailing scientific consensus. Rather being an open discovery procedure, a science clinging to standards stifles creative thought and often devolves into religion.

In the narrower domain of economics, McCloskey (2000) makes a similar methodological point and chides economists for limiting the “intellectual range” of analysis “from M to N.”<sup>1</sup> By relying on an outdated Popperian method to answer all questions, McCloskey thinks economists have engaged in excessive specialization. (She’s probably right!) According to McCloskey, they have produced “Kelly green golfing shoes” and have seldom paused to think about the other crucial aspect of Smith’s division of labor argument: One should specialize in what he or she does best and then trade for other goods and services. In the production of economics, however, we have seen a “dreary” uniformity emerge; the uniformity limits our range and stifles alternative approaches.

McCloskey and Feyerabend push readers to embrace an “anything goes” approach to scientific inquiry in general. Their arguments for liberty in the way we do science can and should be extended to the way we teach students. Rather than rely on one particular approach, such as the “carrot and stick” approach of incentive-based education, an educational philosophy committed to true discovery requires maximum liberty. The teacher’s role is to act as an “umpire” and facilitator. To borrow a metaphor from Vernon Smith (2003), the teacher’s role (much like the economist’s) is to serve as a gardener rather than an engineer. When done correctly, maximum moral development and educational attainment can be realized.

To help readers understand educational anarchism in both the abstract and the concrete, I will focus on the case of Peter Boettke. Boettke’s approach as a mentor does not “fit” into just one educational philosophy. There are two reasons Boettke’s approach

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<sup>1</sup> See also McCloskey (1995).

cannot be easily categorized. First, he tries to guarantee students the maximum amount of liberty in their pursuit of knowledge and truth. Second, his mentoring style varies by the individual. He tries to obtain local and contextual knowledge about his students, and he then adapts his mentoring approach to fit the student's attributes.

One final point about educational anarchism should be made at the outset. Educational anarchism should not be confused with chaos and the "hands off" parenting philosophy currently en vogue. Educational anarchism means unique mentoring methods should be used and that no one method is best. The method implemented depends crucially on mentors having analytical sensitivity, and the approach taken is dictated by the type of person being mentored rather than some kind of *a priori* approach preferred by the mentor. Educational anarchism can be summarized as a "just do it" approach to education; it is akin to a coach trying to get the most out of his players by tapping into their inner strengths. It is NOT an approach equivalent to "mentors should do nothing."

The article proceeds as follows. Section II summarizes the knowledge problem in the market order and explains its existence in the realm of education. Section III then discusses the potential for knowledge problems between mentors and students, and it explains how Peter Boettke has effectively managed and minimized the knowledge problem as a mentor. Section IV concludes. As the paper will make clear, Boettke's approach is consistent with his libertarian principles. Boettke's approach, which I describe as educational anarchism, has already proven effective in advancing liberty and Austrian economics. It is an approach others interested in spreading liberty through education should embrace.

## **II. The Use and Abuse of Knowledge in Education**

For someone like Peter Boettke, who takes the "knowledge problem" (Hayek, 1948b [1945]) seriously, educational anarchism is ultimately grounded in an epistemic claim about how much any one person (i.e., the mentor) can know about the subject matter he or she is trying to understand (i.e., the student). In his "Economics and Knowledge" article (1948a [1937]), Hayek describes the "knowledge problem" as the "central problem" of economic science, and he says the dispersed and contextual nature of knowledge makes it impossible for a central planner to rationally plan an economic system.

Hayek's "knowledge problem" argument has extended into many branches of economics and social science. For example, arguments critical of discretionary central banking, activist judges, and regulation are often based on Hayekian knowledge problem arguments. The field of development economics has also been influenced by Hayek. One of the leading contemporary development economists, William Easterly (2006), is explicit about Hayek's influence. Peter Boettke's work on transition economies and studies of economic development (1994b) also produced Hayekian conclusions: External reform attempts carried out by post-communist regimes or international organizations were destined to fail because the reformers lacked the requisite knowledge (and incentives) to properly carry out the reforms. Because top down reforms are destined to fail, the proper development approach is to decentralize units of authority and promote reforms consistent with local norms and culture. As a recent IMF economist put it (Rajan 2004), it is incumbent upon development economists to "assume anarchy." Or, as Boettke and his co-authors sum up the problem (2006, p.298): "...the only path to prosperity is an indigenous one."

The development problem, then, for economists like Boettke and Easterly, is not an engineering problem. "Solving" the development problem does not require a unique solution to a series of simultaneous equations. Instead, the problem is one where reformers and entrepreneurs must find ways to cultivate and encourage the development of indigenous institutions. Embracing the indigenous institutions and getting reformers to think big but act small allows for the inarticulate bits of knowledge dispersed in an economic system to become articulated. Over time, these local norms become formalized and the division of knowledge becomes a more extended order. As long as reformers act as facilitators, rather than planners, the miracle of economic development can be realized.

While the "knowledge problem" argument has made many inroads into particular fields of economics and has had some influence on cognitive psychology, the "knowledge problem" argument – as developed by Hayek and Austrian economists – has seldom been extended to discussions of moral development and education.<sup>2</sup> For people wanting to avoid constructivist errors – both in policy recommendations and in more local decisions they make – the same

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, Garnett (2009) stands out as an exception.

“knowledge problem” arguments made against central planning of markets, law, and economic development can be used to guide our understanding of how to properly educate students. As Garnett (2009, p.317) puts it:

Transposed into the pedagogical realm, this set of propositions suggests that our central task as teachers – indeed, the defining task of a liberal pedagogy – is to increase our students’ connectivity to local and extended orders of learning (e.g., the knowledge and feedback of peers, professors, and wider intellectual communities) in order to discipline and inspire their thinking, cultivate their intellectual autonomy, and enrich their contributions to the learning of others.

Garnett continues his analysis by focusing on how the classroom can be understood to be a “spontaneous order,” and he bridges insights from Hayek and Palmer (1990, 1998) to make the case for a Socratic teaching method. The “liberal pedagogy” described by Garnett is broadly consistent with Hayekian themes of dispersed knowledge and learning as a discovery procedure.

In the next section, I extend Garnett’s argument and explain how “knowledge problem” arguments extend to mentorship relationships as well. In particular, I describe my relationship with my mentor, Peter Boettke, and explain why I think Pete – whether he realizes it or not – is educational anarchist. He’s an educational anarchist because he’s someone who assumes anarchy. In other words, he assumes different students respond differently to incentives. He assumes they have different preferences and different talents. He tries to avoid doing harm by actually getting to know his students and asking them what they want to do with their degrees. In some cases he uses carrots and sticks as motivators; at other times, he relies on encouragement or shame. His approach is unique to the individual and unique to the circumstances at a particular moment in time. The approach is consistent with Hayekian insights, and it has a radical Feyerabendite element to it because “anything goes” and any method is on the table when it comes to how Pete mentors his different students.

### III. Boettke as an Educational Anarchist

Most mentors probably take a formulaic approach to mentoring. The approach probably works well and fits nicely into one of the four philosophies described in Kneller (1971). For example, Kneller says “progressivism” is one of the four teaching philosophies, and it encourages the teacher to focus on his or her role as an advisor rather than a director. By contrast, Kneller says “essentialism” encourages learning through hard work. In his later book, *Educational Anthropology* (1978), Kneller explains how educators often get stuck in one particular approach and tend to apply it to all students. Invariably, some students thrive under the particular approach an educator implements, and others struggle. Of course, there is a problem with adherence to just one approach: The educator is attempting to use a blunt instrument – namely one particular educational method for all – in an environment where careful detail and many different tools are needed. By relying on just one trick or tool for all students, the educator is acting much like a central planner. He or she is unresponsive to different consumer (i.e., student) preferences, and the educational environment often deteriorates into “edutainment” (the equilibrium often found in higher education) or tyranny (the equilibrium of most K-12 classrooms).

Peter Boettke takes a different approach. Although he insists he is not a Socratic teacher and “doesn’t have the patience for economics to be ‘discovered;’” in the classroom, his approach is not limited to one method. He’s eclectic, and his methods are highly dependent on the person he’s mentoring. When he comes across a student he feels has a lot of talent but a poor work ethic, Boettke the essentialist emerges. Lazy students get advice like, “Consistently apply the seat of your pants to the seat of your chair and write.” For his students with too much enthusiasm for economics, he often spends his time cautioning against being a “lunch tax.” (A “lunch tax” is a person with whom you go to lunch once and say to yourself afterward, “Never again.”) For his students scared to throw a hard punch in their economic arguments, he encourages them to have self-confidence in their ideas and to do “economics with an attitude.” In sum, no single approach summarizes Pete Boettke’s mentoring philosophy because Pete understands the diversity and complexity of the individual. He’s an educational anarchist (and a philosophical one too). He treated me differently, and the different treatment I received had nothing to do with being one of Pete’s favorites and had

everything to do with me being a unique individual. As a unique individual, Pete's mentoring techniques needed to be different to get the most out of me. The remainder of the section will illustrate Boettke's educational anarchism by first focusing on my experience working with him and then briefly explaining how it differed from the way he interacted with some of the other students who were around me at the same time.

I first met Pete Boettke in the summer of 1999 at the Advanced Summer Seminar in Austrian Economics at the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) conference in Irvington, NY. I was a junior at Northern Michigan University (Marquette, MI) majoring in economics and history with a mathematics minor. I had heard great things about Pete through my undergraduate advisor and mentor, David Prychitko, and I was thrilled to finally meet him.<sup>3</sup>

The next academic year – my senior year – I worked closely with Dave Prychitko to better prepare for the PhD program at George Mason University (GMU). Dave “dragged me by the ear” (to borrow a Joseph Salerno line from the oral tradition) through a number of essays in methodology. He committed every minute of his office hours to working with me, and my final semester culminated in the reading of *Human Action* from front to back with Dave.

As we worked our way through Mises in my final semester at NMU, I was entertaining offers from a number of different graduate programs. I visited several of the schools and carefully considered the offers, but GMU blew me away with their hospitality. I still have fond memories of talking late in the night with Ed Stringham, Bob

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<sup>3</sup> The week at FEE with Pete and other leading Austrian economists – people like Roger Garrison, Israel Kirzner, Mario Rizzo, and Larry White – confirmed several things for me. First, the conference confirmed for me that I wanted to be an economist and work with people committed to free market scholarship. Second, the conference was confirmation for me that I could do it; while I was probably the youngest person at the conference, I felt like my training at NMU was already giving me the firm foundation I needed to perform in a graduate program. And, third, I knew by the end of the week that my heart was set on attending George Mason University and working with Pete. In his lecture on transition economics that week, Pete delivered an impassioned lecture that left me believing the ideas and arguments of economics matter greatly in the “real world.” I rode back to the Newark airport after the conference with Pete and Larry White (then a professor at the University of Georgia), and I knew then that I wanted to study Austrian Economics at George Mason University with Pete.

Subrick, and Derek Yonai – three of my hosts – about Murray Rothbard and the future of Austrian economics. The culture of Mason was one in which ideas were taken seriously and the Austrian tradition was embraced. Ed in particular was making Austrian economics a viable research program at GMU again, and he was helping to recreate the “go out on a ledge and hang yourself”<sup>4</sup> attitude that was present for the 1980s generation of GMU scholars.<sup>5</sup>

As my advisor and teacher, Dave introduced me to the ideas of the Austrian School of Economic Thought. His EC 420: Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy course reading list included Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom* and Mises’s *Planning for Freedom*. In EC 420, Prychitko carefully walked us through the classical and Marxist worldviews before concluding the class with a defense of absolute liberty. I can still remember the final class of the semester, when Prychitko defended his “my liberty ends where your nose begins” principle and threw in plugs to the work of Murray Rothbard, Robert Nozick, and Peter Boettke.

As I took more classes from Dave and hung out with him in his office, I began to hear stories about “Pete the Dynamo,” who Dave constantly described as one of the key players in the young generation of Austrians. We read a number of Boettke and Prychitko readings, including *The Market Process* by Boettke and Prychitko, Boettke’s *Why Perestroika Failed* (which I still think is a masterpiece in political economy), and many of the essays in Boettke’s *Elgar Companion*. Dave began to encourage me to attend summer seminars with the Institute for Humane Studies (IHS) and the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), and I listened to his advice. And, the rest, as they say, was history.

I began my training at George Mason University in Fall 2000 and finished on time in Spring 2004. My time at George Mason University working with Pete was both rewarding and exhausting. It was rewarding because Pete’s energy and excitement about ideas and his students exceeded my wildest expectations of what it could be like. He often tells us he has lived his life as a “corner solution” life committed to economics, and there’s a point to what he’s saying: The

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Steve Horwitz for passing along the above quote.

<sup>5</sup> Pete was a gracious host and advisor while I searched for the right school. While other schools tried to attract me by taking shots at George Mason University, Pete always talked about how tough the choice was and how the other options I had on the table were also good ones deserving of careful consideration.

man loves to debate, and he tries to make his students better by often taking contrarian (and even insane!) positions. It was exhausting because there was seldom down time or a break from the back and forth exchange of ideas. Economics was an all day and every day affair, and there was seldom time to break from the exchange of ideas and reflect.

I feel like I lucked out in my timing of graduate school at George Mason because the students there around my class of students were bright and have gone on to have successful careers. Ed Stringham and Virgil Storr were a couple years ahead of me, and they worked hard to create space for Austrian economists at Mason. My class had Ben Powell, and the class behind me had Chris Coyne and Peter Leeson. Together we formed a core of students united by our interest in Austrian economics and constantly encouraged by Pete.

Although Pete was crazy-busy throughout my time at George Mason, his impact on me was profound. I took every class Pete taught, and I learned how to be a passionate teacher by simply observing him. Pete was someone I turned to for help with economic arguments, and I could always count on him to be the harshest critic (though he didn't have Lavoie's red pen!) and the biggest fan of my work. He became much more than a mentor throughout my training – he became a dear friend and a colleague. His passion in the classroom, his genuine concern about his students' well being, and his irreverent attitude toward the State are just a few of the things I have taken from Pete and transmit in my own work.

As a young man with questionable male role models in my life, I feel very fortunate to have studied under Pete Boettke and Dave Prychitko. They both exemplify all that is good in our discipline – honesty, integrity, the payoff from hard work, etc. By affecting the “trajectory” (as Pete calls it) of my career, they have had a bigger influence in my life than just about anyone else. I think Pete and Dave both know they played a huge role in my life, but I've never asked them if they're aware of just how important they have been to me.

In my role as an undergraduate professor at Mercer University, I have tried to take the lessons I learned from Pete and Dave and apply them here at Mercer. Like Pete, I want to win, and I'd like to win sooner rather than later. Winning will involve finding high quality students – the next generation of Stringhams, Leasons, Powells, and Coyne – and “feeding them” to people like Pete Boettke et al. I view

my role as an academic entrepreneur as one of my more important roles when it comes to contributing to Austrian economics and the broader free market movement. In trying to create value, identify talent, and “feed” students on to internships and graduate programs, I draw on everything I’ve learned from Pete and Dave about economics and about life.

Pete was an educational anarchist because he took the time to get to know me. He figured out a mentoring approach that worked well for the two of us, and he was constantly open revising it as new information or circumstances led him to do so. He applied a different approach in his mentorship with me than he did with other students. For example, when mentoring two of my closest friends in the program, Ben Powell and Ed Stringham, Pete spent a lot more time debating them on the details of anarchism and pushed them to think about the “hard questions” their position struggles to answer. In his relationship with Chris Coyne and Peter Leeson, Pete cultivated a “Bloomington school” (Aligica and Boettke, 2009) style production process in which his students were treated as equals in the production of top-notch research.

In my case, Pete spent a lot more time encouraging me to be confident in my ideas and to be uncompromising in my positions. Like in his relationship with Ed and Ben, Pete and I had many debates (some of the best ones took place in Prague, Czech Republic, and revolved around “rational irrationality”). Like in his relationship with Chris and Peter Leeson, Pete and I worked together (and continue to do so) on a number of research projects. But, his lasting contribution on me was the confidence he gave me to trust my ideas and arguments. Pete’s influence has paid off for me in both the classroom and in my research. Thanks to Pete, my teaching style is a “take no prisoner” one, and I occasionally catch myself sounding a lot like Pete (though my digressions involve Carlos Zambrano instead of Derek Jeter!). My writing has also become harder hitting – particularly my policy projects, such as my recently co-authored (with Mark Adams) *Increasing Taxes During a Recession: The Wrong Medicine for Georgia* and my op-ed writing.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

Pete Boettke is an educational anarchist. He relies on a case-by-case approach to mentoring, and he avoids cookie cutter approaches to his students’ problems. His approach to mentoring is consistent

with, and informed by, both Austrian economics and libertarian ideas. His largely implicit educational philosophy treats learning as a discovery procedure. Students with different abilities and backgrounds must have their tacit knowledge tapped into and unleashed through different methods. Pete finds ways to unleash the inner economist in many different types of students, and the impact his efforts have had on the Austrian movement in particular and the broader discipline of economics are obvious and documented.<sup>6</sup>

His method as a mentor is quite radical, and it's consistent with the broader methodological turn being recommended by philosophers of science. To avoid the "Kelly green golf shoes" outcome described by McCloskey, a radical reorientation in mentoring must occur in the profession. If and when a reorientation in the discipline of economics occurs, one of the Renaissance men other economists will want to emulate is my mentor, Peter Boettke. When they look closely at Boettke's record as a mentor, they will find the only path to success as a mentor is an indigenous one.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Stringham's essay in this volume and Beaulier and Hall (2009).

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