

Effective Communication in Economics: Lessons from Peter Boettke

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Abstract

Deidre McCloskey's (1983, 1986) critique of economic rhetoric exposes the discipline's modern day struggle with effective communication. This article examines the McCloskey critique as it applies to academia, and highlights the value of integrating relatable stories into economic discourse. The economic dialogue led by Peter Boettke, a professor and promoter of economic ideas, is used to demonstrate the impact that effective communication can have on peers and followers.

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I. Introduction

Economics is dubbed the “dismal science,”¹ and has a reputation of being a boring subject mastered and taught by boring people. McCloskey (1983) writes, “economics is misunderstood and, when regarded at all, disliked by both humanists and scientists.” To remedy this, McCloskey recommends that economists improve their rhetoric, how they “explore thought through conversation,” highlighting the importance of analogies, metaphors, parables, and stories. The importance of delivery, language, and style in gaining an audience for economic ideas is demonstrated by the recent success of *Freakonomics* (Levitt and Dubner, 2005), a widely read non-fiction book filled with economic anecdotes. *Freakonomics* peaked at number two among nonfiction on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and a film version is in the works (*Freakonomics*, 2010). The book presents the academic research of Steven D. Levitt, a chaired professor of economics at the University of Chicago. Its popularity among non-economists,

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¹ See Levy and Peart (2001) for a discussion of the term “dismal science.”

however, is largely due to co-author, non-economist, and journalist Stephen J. Dubner, who, according to the book, agreed to do the writing and help Levitt translate his findings into non-academic, accessible terms.² The success of *Freakonomics* triggered an onslaught of “pop-economic” publications, i.e., books focused on the application of economic thinking to relatable issues such as speed dating rather than more long-established topics such as wages, profits and recessions. A few pop-economics examples include Robert Frank’s *The Economic Naturalist* (2007), Steven Landsburg’s *More Sex Is Safer Sex* (2007) and Tyler Cowen’s *Discover Your Inner Economist* (2007), but the list goes on and on.

The widespread appeal of the melding of pop culture and economics reinforces the McCloskey critique (1983, 1986) and underscores the relevance of rhetoric in disseminating economic ideas. This essay argues that rhetoric is largely undervalued by economists, particularly within academia. The essay uses as example the success that Professor Peter Boettke has had in communicating economic ideas and inspiring students. Pete Boettke’s example demonstrates that packaging of economic content is of tremendous importance in promoting economic discourse, ideas for freedom, and social change. Section II discusses the use of rhetoric, the art of using language to persuade, in the classroom. Section III argues that rhetoric applied to a well-crafted story is an undervalued, effective way to communicate economic ideas. Section IV provides a case study of effective communication through the example of Professor Peter Boettke, who not only inspired my own pursuit of economic discourse, but who has an uncanny ability to capture an audience and disseminate ideas.

II. The Use of Rhetoric in Communication

Rhetoric is defined as “the art of speaking or writing effectively” and “skill in the effective use of speech.”³ It is derived from the Greek word *rhētorikē*, which first appeared in Plato’s writing in the fourth century B.C. (Kennedy, 1980, pp.1–2; Wardy, pp.1–2). Early use of rhetoric in Greek society is depicted in literature such as

² The impact of *Freakonomics* in furthering economic research and political discourse, however, is largely contested. See for example, Schleiber’s (2007) discussion of the “descent into cute-o-nomics,” in which Schleiber notes that creativity can also be used in examining important economic questions.

³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric>, accessed March 10, 2010.

Homer's *Iliad*, in which heroes like Achilles, Hektor, and Odysseus were honored for their ability to advise and exhort their peers and followers in wise and appropriate action (Kennedy, 1980, pp.4–5). Rhetoric evolved to adapt to the needs of the public and political life of the cities of ancient Greece, which relied on the oratory medium for political and judicial decisions, and for the dissemination of philosophical ideas (Kennedy, 1980, p.5). Thus rhetoric was once deemed an important art that provided the orator with the forms, means, and strategies for persuading an audience of the correctness of the orator's arguments. Today the term rhetoric is more often used in a pejorative sense in describing unsubstantiated attempts to influence an audience (Dixon, p.5).⁴

However, rhetoric, in terms of speaking and writing effectively, is an important consideration in modern day, as demonstrated by the "Dr. Fox effect." The Dr. Fox effect is a phenomenon that references research observing a correlation between teacher expressiveness, content coverage, student evaluation, and student achievement (Nautifin et al., 1973). The original research study took place in 1972 and found that when an actor under the pseudonym Dr. Myron L. Fox delivered a meaningless lecture on "Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education" with a lively demeanor and humor, an audience of academics and experienced educators felt unambiguously satisfied that they had learned something. The authors explain that the audience members "were seduced by the style of Dr. Fox's presentation." In fact, Dr. Fox was awarding praised for an "[e]xcellent presentation," "warm manner," "[g]ood flow," "[l]ively examples," and "[g]ood analysis of subject."

This "Dr. Fox effect" illustrates that in the venue of a lecture, presentation as opposed to just content itself is of utmost importance. That is not to say that content does not matter. In fact, high content coverage and high expressiveness together have been shown to command not only strong audience evaluation, but also high student achievement, as demonstrated by further study in controlled classroom environments inspired by the Dr. Fox paradigm (Merritt, 2008).

⁴ One definition of rhetoric is noted to include "insincere or grandiloquent language" (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric>, accessed March 10, 2010).

III. The Literature of Economic Content

How can economists embellish the content of their discourse without deviating into pop economics and while still addressing fundamental economic issues? A lively presentation, as discussed above, is beneficial but likely not enough. Charles Wheelan (2003), author of *Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science*, writes, “The sad irony of Econ 101 is that students too often suffer through dull, esoteric lectures while economics is going on all around them.” My own experience reinforces Wheelan’s point. Like most economic students, my economics training primarily involved graphs and equations and eventually rigorous mathematical concepts like “real analysis” and “hyperplanes.”⁵

However, as McCloskey (1983) recognizes, economics is not only highly metaphorical, but it lends itself well to parables. Consider, for example, Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* and Alfred Marshall’s *Principles of Economics*, which introduce fundamental economic concepts, largely without the use of formulas or complicated calculations. Adam Smith’s contributions to the discipline include infamous economic analogies such as the “invisible hand” as well as numerous dramatizations of economic concepts, such as his discussion of comparative advantage and the making of a pin in 1776 (Smith, 1776, pp.6–7, 421). Similarly, Alfred Marshall demonstrated supply and demand concepts through his retelling of the “cotton famine” of 1860s England (Marshall, 1920, pp.111–12).

McCloskey (1983) further writes that “the range of persuasive discourse in economics is wide, ignored in precept but potent in practice,” noting that analogy, metaphor, and parable are dimly recognized by economists. The effectiveness of stories, or parables, for relating information, particularly in the classroom, is well established. The functions that stories take on are well documented in the psychology and educational literature (Green, 2004). Stories are

⁵ Similar to most economics PhD program requirements, all first year PhD students at NYU are required to take Mathematics for Economists I and II. The course descriptions for these courses are respectively described as “Reviews theory of calculus, linear algebra, and constrained optimization. Theory and methods of differential equations, calculus of variations, optimal control theory, and dynamic programming applied to economic problems,” and “Methods and applications of optimal control theory to problems of economics. Discusses economic applications of stochastic processes, probability, measure theory, and topology.” (<http://econ.as.nyu.edu/object/economics.0709.grad.courseofferings>, accessed July 22, 2009).

powerful in their ability to generate audience interest – they engage the mind and emotions, and often lead to the creation of mental imagery (Green and Brock, 2000). Listeners often can put themselves into the narrative and in join in on the action of the narrative (Polichak and Gerrig, 2000). As psychologist Melanie Green (2004) notes, “Bringing all of these systems to bear on the material in your course helps student learning. Students are awake, following along, wanting to find out what happens next and how the story ends.”

Pop economics aside, it is possible to combine lively presentation and well-crafted content to effectively communicate serious economic content. The communication skills of economics professor Peter Boettke provide an excellent example.

IV. Peter Boettke as an Effective Communicator

Ken Bain (2003), author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*, writes, “the best teachers know their subjects inside and out – but they also know how to engage and challenge students and to provoke impassioned responses.” Peter Boettke, professor of economics at George Mason University, exemplifies and reinforces Bain’s findings about teacher efficacy. Like the actor Dr. Fox, Professor Boettke uses warm, enthusiastic, and lively nonverbal behaviors as well as content that weaves in useful anecdotes. In fact, fellow George Mason economics professor and econ “blogger” Brian Caplan argues that “Pete Boettke should write a book called Enlightening Anecdotes. I’ve learned a lot from Pete, but mostly from his amazing inventory of truthy first-hand stories. I think he should share this oral tradition with the world” (http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2010/01/the_books_i_wis.html, accessed March 20, 2010).⁶

Pete has an equally inspiring effect on his students. In May 2009, Pete Boettke won the GMU Alumni Association Faculty Member of the Year award, an award for which candidates are nominated by former students (Rich, 2009). He also received recognition in 1995 for excellence in undergraduate teaching at New York University. Informal reports of Pete’s effective teaching appear on a popular Internet site that rates professors. At ratemyprofessors.com, students say that “[Boettke] is...truly inspirational,” “funny and entertaining,”

⁶ Caplan is one of three daily bloggers who contributes to EconLog, one of the *Wall Street Journal's* Top 25 Economics Blogs (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124768581740247061.html>, accessed March 21, 2010).

“clear and insightful,” and an “excellent storyteller.” One student reports that “[h]e uses millions of anecdotes to teach the material, and has multitudes of suggestions for literature that should be read by ECON students.” (accessed March 20, 2010).

The secret to Pete Boettke’s success as an educator lies not only in his ability to put on a good performance, but in his ability to relay relevant material. He is committed to the discussion of substantive economic issues and the promotion of serious economic thinking. He directs weekly workshops and summer seminars, has served as an editor in various capacities, and has published numerous books and articles. In 2005, Pete was recognized for his achievements and contributions to economics, receiving both the Charles Koch Distinguished Alumnus award from the Institute for Humane Studies and the Jack Kennedy Award for Alumni Achievement from Grove City College.

IV. Conclusion

F.A. Hayek admitted in his 1944 address to the London School of Economics, “On Being an Economist,” that “the dislike for most of the teaching of the economists in the past has built up a picture of the economist as a sort of monster devouring children.” Professor Peter Boettke’s influence in academia helps to challenge the traditional perception of economists as being boring, dismal, or monster-like. His delivery of economic material is compelling and his enthusiasm for economic discourse contagious. His great rhetorical skill and commitment to economics serve as a model for the promotion of further economic inquiry. Pete has inspired numerous people to pursue serious economic research, including myself. As a past student of Pete’s, I have not only had the great opportunity to witness and enjoy his tremendous ability to tell a good story but have been inspired by his example.

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