Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
Exploring business students’ ability to think in an economic way: A study in an introductory economics course at one New Zealand tertiary institution

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education (Adult Education)

At Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Janet Linda Turvey

2014
ABSTRACT

The teaching of economics at an introductory level in the tertiary sector is fraught with challenges. Students arrive from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some have little more than a lay person’s understanding of the economic world, whilst others have studied the subject previously and are familiar with the language, techniques and models embedded within it. These techniques are usually described collectively as the ‘economic way of thinking’ by economists. Most students are also studying the subject as part of a wider business qualification and therefore it is not their main focus during their studies. This problem has been researched extensively by many teachers of economics over the past forty years, but students still appear to emerge from their fast paced courses with only the rudimentary understandings of the subject.

The aim of this study was designed to investigate whether students, studying a one semester introductory course in economics at an Institute of Technology and Polytechnic (ITP) in New Zealand, could demonstrate that they were beginning to ‘think like economists’. The data used as evidence were the reflective journals or diaries of the students’ learning. The study further aimed to discover whether the construct of threshold concepts could contribute to an understanding of the problems and challenges that many students demonstrated within their journals.

The sample group for study was taken from three introductory economics courses at one ITP in New Zealand. Students were studying this course either as a compulsory component of their Bachelor of Business Studies or part of a core of subjects for New Zealand Diploma in Business. Thirty seven students’ journals provided valid data for the study. The design employed a constructivist epistemology and an interpretivist theoretical perspective, using a qualitative research approach. The journals were analysed for evidence of students’ understanding by means of tables developed specifically for this purpose. An analysis was further carried out of students’ quotations from the reflective journals to establish evidence of the ‘economic way of thinking’ through nineteen foundation aspects within their journals.
The findings of this study showed that from 703 observations of 37 students’ journal entries 206 had demonstrated a sophisticated level of the ‘economic way of thinking’ (categorised as level 3), 338 showed they were transitioning in their thinking (level 2), and 159 demonstrated negligible understanding of the ‘economic way of thinking’ (level 1).

Four propositions and recommendations were developed. A substantial group of students did demonstrate evidence of a sophisticated understanding of certain foundation aspects of the ‘economic way of thinking’ and the reflective journals provided evidence of this. Some of the foundation aspects appeared to create greater challenges for all students, but they were not all necessarily threshold concepts by themselves. It was also proposed that the literature on threshold concepts could assist in targeting the gaps students had in their understanding, whilst a web developed of the foundation aspects of the ‘economic way of thinking’ might assist students to appreciate the integrative nature of these aspects. Other avenues of further research might be the importance of teaching about threshold concepts to target specific troublesome areas, and the significance of the type of activities carried out in the journal that most contributes to the students’ understanding. The perceptions students have of the use of reflective journals for their learning and teacher feedback during the writing of the journal could be further possibilities in the future.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisors, Dr Peter Rawlins and Associate Professor Nick Zepke, for their able guidance during this thesis. They have been unfailingly supportive and constructive throughout the process and enabled me to focus and keep motivated when the way was not always too clear. I would also like to thank the Eastern Institute of Technology for their support and encouragement throughout the two years of my study, and for providing me with the impetus to carry out this research.

I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Salome Meyer, Gay Robertson and Sally Woods for proof reading and offering their suggestions in the later stages of this thesis.

Finally I would like to thank all the students who provided me with the valuable data on which to base this research. Without you all this would not have been possible.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.......................................................................................................................................... i

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................................ iii

LIST OF FIGURES .......................................................................................................................... viii

LIST OF TABLES .............................................................................................................................. ix

CHAPTER ONE - Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1

  Background ................................................................................................................................. 1

  The researcher’s interest ............................................................................................................ 2

  Aims of the research ................................................................................................................ 3

  Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 4

  Thesis outline ........................................................................................................................... 4

CHAPTER TWO - Literature review ................................................................................................. 6

  Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 6

  Economics at the undergraduate level ..................................................................................... 6

  The economic way of thinking ................................................................................................. 7

  The complexity of teaching economics .................................................................................. 11

  Threshold concepts and the economic way of thinking ........................................................... 14

  Core concepts and threshold concepts ...................................................................................... 18

  Reflection .................................................................................................................................. 24

  The economic way of thinking and reflective journals ............................................................. 26

  Summary .................................................................................................................................. 29

CHAPTER THREE – Methodology and Methods .......................................................................... 30

  Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 30
Nature of the Study................................................................................................................ 30
Research Approach ................................................................................................................ 30
Role of Researcher .................................................................................................................. 32
Context of the Study .............................................................................................................. 33
Setting: ................................................................................................................................... 33
Sample.................................................................................................................................... 34
Trustworthiness ...................................................................................................................... 34
Credibility/ Dependability/ Transferability/ Confirmability.................................................. 35
Ethical Considerations: .......................................................................................................... 36
Methods: Data Gathering Processes and Tools: ................................................................. 37
Data Analysis: ........................................................................................................................ 38
Summary ................................................................................................................................ 45

CHAPTER FOUR – Analysis of the Data ............................................................................... 46

Introduction:........................................................................................................................... 46
Part One: Findings .................................................................................................................. 47
Results of classifications ................................................................................................. 47
Non-attempted entries ............................................................................................................ 50
Part Two: Analysis .................................................................................................................. 51
Section 1: Samples from students’ work at Level 3........................................................... 52
Section 2: Foundation Aspects Creating Challenges (few students at level 3)............... 62
Section 3: The ‘Liminal Space’ ............................................................................................. 67
Summary of Analysis............................................................................................................. 72

CHAPTER FIVE - Discussion................................................................................................. 74

Introduction............................................................................................................................ 74
Discussion on propositions 1- 2 ........................................................................................... 75
APPENDIX G: Massey University approval letter.................................125
APPENDIX H: EIT approval letter ..........................................................126
APPENDIX I: Letter of introduction to students....................................127
APPENDIX J: Participant information sheet.........................................128
APPENDIX K: Participant Consent Form............................................131
APPENDIX L: Reflective journal............................................................132
APPENDIX M: Data analysis table for students’ journals .......................141
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Web of economic concepts extracted from Davies & Mangan (2007) .....................20
Figure 2: Web of the Foundation Aspects of the economic way of thinking .........................88
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Authors and Economic way of thinking/basic concepts........................................9
Table 2: Table of Interpretivist understanding of Social Science........................................31
Table 3a: Economic Way of Thinking Results from the Reflective journals .......................42
Table 3b: Location in reflective journal of foundation aspects..........................................44
Table 4: Totals of students that signify achievement at the three levels in the foundations aspects of the economic way of thinking .................................................................49
Table 5: Non-attempted questions ......................................................................................50
Table 6: Template Planner for Reflective Journal Entries to Guide students ....................90