

Individual Goals and the Common Good: Teaching Economics in American Studies

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ABSTRACT

Convinced of the major advantages and effectiveness of an interdisciplinary approach in teaching, colleagues from American Studies, Economics, and Greek Studies offered a joint seminar for master's degree students on "Individual Goals and the Common Good: Perspectives on Utility Concepts from Ancient Greek Literature, American Studies, and Economics." We intended to expose the students to a new approach to significant texts and authors that address these key economic concepts and to integrate the perspectives from the three disciplines. In this essay, we describe the development of our methodological approach, the individual and common goals that guided us, the challenges that we encountered, and the extent to which we achieved our goals.

Keywords: critical thinking, common good, individual goals, interdisciplinary teaching, utility concepts, traveling concepts

INDIVIDUAL AND COMMON GOALS

The common goal that motivated our team of three professors from three disciplines to propose an interdisciplinary seminar for students at the master's level on "Individual Goals and the Common Good: Perspectives on Utility Concepts

from Ancient Greek, American Studies, and Economics” was to go beyond disciplinary boundaries to learn more about our own disciplinary perspectives and to develop an understanding of our colleagues’ approaches. While interdisciplinary research has frequently been discussed, practiced, and theorized, interdisciplinary teaching is only gradually making its way into both practical teaching and theoretical investigation. We wanted to expose students to an experience that they would all share and to contribute to the enabling of interdisciplinary communication, which seems to have suffered from ongoing specialization, a key economic force that is observable in all occupations, academia being no exception (Aldrich, 2014:11). To this end, we chose an interdisciplinary approach in teaching rather than a mere multidisciplinary and, thus, additive method (Klein, 2017).

Concepts of individual goals and the common good are anchored in all three disciplines. For example, the concept of social welfare, defined as the sum of consumer and producer rents, is a commonly applied benchmark in economic analysis. Nevertheless, students of economics may not be aware of its philosophical underpinnings. On the other hand, students of ancient Greek and American studies may be aware of utilitarianism as a philosophical school of thought but unaware of how their ideas can be applied to economic analysis. We thus chose the “traveling concepts” (Bal 2002) of individual goals and the common good as the focus of our seminar because these concepts are widely accessible.

The key learning goal for the seminar participants was to deepen their knowledge of their own discipline and to become familiar with other disciplinary perspectives. The unique composition of expertise coming together in the seminar was intended to uncover the disciplines’ common ground and to identify discipline-specific points of view. These insights can sharpen the reflection of one’s own discipline and enhance the appreciation of a multitude of perspectives. Students were supposed to work in interdisciplinary teams and present the results of their analysis to the group consisting of experts from different fields, an experience that would enhance their ability to argue convincingly in a heterogeneously composed group. The appreciation of each disciplinary perspective is at the top of Newell’s top 10 list of best practices in interdisciplinary studies (Newell, 2013:30).

In the introduction to the special issue on traveling concepts published in this journal, Diphorn et al. (2023:6) attest that the potential of traveling concepts for teaching has not been sufficiently explored. Like the contributions to this special issue, we aim to address this shortcoming by sharing our approach and our experiences. As they say in their abstract, “Traveling concepts refer to the metaphorical traveling or use of concepts within and between disciplines that impacts their meaning, reach, and operational value” (2023:1). This concept, therefore, allows for easier interdisciplinary work and results that integrate the various disciplines, as we experienced in our classroom context.

INDIVIDUAL AND COMMON GOALS AS THE FOCUS OF THE SEMINAR

With the choice of the concrete (yet abstract) concepts of individual goals and the common good as the objects of study in the seminar, we intended to focus the perspectives from the different disciplines on one shared topic and to facilitate students' and teachers' access to an understanding of our common grounds and the particularities of the disciplines. We considered the topic of the seminar to be particularly suitable for an interdisciplinary approach because an intuitive understanding and a certain degree of familiarity with the concepts should already be present. Our collective elaboration could then shed light on how disciplinary conceptualizations are shaped by one's own educational background and would allow us to explore an understanding that was shared by all but also to highlight deviating perspectives. As noted by Miller & Boix Masilla (2004:8), the "illusion of mutual understanding" can be particularly challenging in interdisciplinary communication.

Economics captures the notions of individual goals and the common good with the concept of "utility." "Utility" captures the degree of satisfaction with individual goals, and concepts of the common good are based on it as well. The representation of goals in terms of "utility" is usually taught early on in the studies of economics, with the focus being on the application of formal methods. Students of economics would therefore benefit from the integration of the philosophical roots and the cultural and historical embedding that was offered in our seminar, while students from the disciplines of American (and Greek) Studies would benefit from the more explicit conceptualization of individual goals and common goods. This process reveals the assumptions that are implicitly made when using them in the contexts of arguments, ideas, and stories.

For economists, it would be particularly interesting to reflect on one of the key concepts of their own discipline—utility—in the given interdisciplinary context. For students of American studies, which in Germany is currently practiced from predominantly literary, cultural, historical, political, and media points of view, it would be particularly interesting to apply their methods to economic concepts while at the same time being exposed to the comparatively formal way of argumentation in economics. Both sides would benefit from bringing concepts and contexts closer together.

"Utility" has played an important role in ideas and concepts since the earliest texts of Western culture, long before modern economists reflected on this topic. We can find concepts of utility not only in economic and philosophical texts but also in poetic and fictional texts, which explicitly or implicitly use them. The early poetic text of the Greek author Hesiod (7th century BCE), one of the first texts that we discussed with the students, uses "utility" as a category and reflects on the relation between individual utility and common good. Likewise, the

thoughts and argumentation of figures in Greek tragedies such as Sophocles's Antigone (5th century BCE) reveal ideas of utility. The Greek philosopher Plato (4th century BCE) thinks more explicitly about utility as an incentive of human behavior and about the relation of the categories "useful" and "good." In modern times, the scholars Adam Smith (18th century CE) and Jeremy Bentham (18th to 19th century CE), who themselves had an education in the Classics, developed the theory that human beings in general pursue their own benefit. They also investigated the relationship between individual and common goals. Starting from their ideas, "utility" has become the central concept of economics and now plays an important role in the mathematical models of economics that conceptualize and measure "utility." At the same time, we can find that modern political and fictional texts such as novels and short stories integrate 'utility' as an important motivation for people's behavior and acts. In this sense, our classroom became an interdisciplinary contact zone (Küchler, 2010).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The seminar took place in 14 weekly sessions of 90 minutes each during the summer of 2019. For our specific teaching scenario, we chose a cultural studies approach that looks at narratives in their cultural and historical contexts and considers the texts as products of these contexts, shaping these contexts at the same time (Stiersdorfer, 2005). We selected texts from the three disciplines that would be accessible to readers from different disciplinary backgrounds and that addressed notions of individual goals, utility, and the common good. Texts in different formats (ranging from tragedies to scientific articles) and from different epochs (ranging from the 7th century BCE to the present) guided us in approaching a set of core questions. Instead, Diphoorn & McGonigle Leyh (2023) use podcast episodes. While we focus on specific traveling concepts, they are interested in the traveling of several concepts. Like us, they use guiding questions as an element to structure interdisciplinary dialog.

We approached all texts with the same set of questions about individual utility, the common good, and tensions between them. The guiding questions to be addressed were as follows: What is utility? What is the common good? When do we talk about a tension between individual utility and the common good? What contributes to utility? Can we observe or even measure utility? Do individuals succeed in maximizing utility? What contributes to the common good? Can we measure the common good? How can the common good be maximized?

While the analysis of texts is not on top of the toolbox used in economics, which rather applies quantitative methods and sees the purpose of a text in documenting the analysis, the concepts we discussed and the questions we

formulated are situated at its core. Indeed, Vachris & Bohanon (2021) advocate the use of novels to teach economic concepts. Using methods that are prevalent in American (and Greek) studies to address concepts and questions that are prevalent in economics seemed to be the most effective and fruitful way to bring the disciplines together.

The original Greek texts mentioned above, in class mostly read in English translation, served as the basis for many economic theories on our topic and opened students' and teachers' eyes to the long traditions some of the theories and practices have at least in the Western world.

From the economics side, in addition to the two classical texts mentioned above, we used two more texts that were recently published in economic journals (Leshem, 2016; Loewenstein, 1999) and meant to provide a connection to the disciplines of American and Greek studies, on the one hand, and to integrate more recent concepts from (behavioral) economics, on the other hand. The text by Adam Smith (1776) introduces the students to the idea that economic actors, being exposed to the incentives provided by market prices and thus being guided by an "invisible hand," contribute to a greater good just by pursuing their own objectives. Jeremy Bentham's (1780) text conveys the idea of measuring the common good of a society by means of the sum of the utilities of its members, the foundation of utilitarianism. Leshem (2016) explicates the links between the modern conceptualizations and concepts proposed by Ancient Greek philosophers, and Loewenstein (1999) broadens the perspective to what contributes to "utility." This selection of texts allowed for an elaboration of the limitations of the respective concepts, such as the presence of external factors that limit the effectiveness of the invisible hand as a guide toward the common good. It also allowed us to critically reflect on the relation between utilitarian and deontological concepts and to observe how the concepts evolved over time. Moreover, it addressed the prevailing prejudice that economics ("the evil science") features only profit-maximizing egoists.

From American Studies and American literature, we chose Thomas Jefferson's "Query XIX: Manufactures" from his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1788) with a focus on his Agrarian Ideal, Andrew Carnegie's ideas expressed in *The Gospel of Wealth* (1889), Sarah Orne Jewett's short story "The Foreigner" (1900), and Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" (1973). While the first two texts focus on the official and national political and economic principles proclaimed in the eighteenth century (the American husbandman as the prototypical and virtuous American in contrast to the cancerous European manufacturers) and the late nineteenth century (the steel industry, the large companies' industrial monopolies, and the individual "from-rags-to-riches" story), respectively, the latter two concentrate more on the fictional representation of common people in different economic situations and could be considered case studies: Jewett's "foreigner" is a woman subject to colonial, gender, and religious

restrictions and othering mechanisms and dependent on her new husband's money; Walker's two sisters try to come to terms with their African (American) heritage by using the heirloom of the quilt for museum and memory culture nostalgia, on the one hand, and practical purposes, on the other hand.

Detecting underlying power relationships (as in politics, gender, class, and ethnicity) that resulted in economic practices (or vice versa) would help us obtain access to the deeper layers of the respective texts' meaning and their contribution to the broader history and development of the United States. Due to the time range of the texts, we covered three centuries and were able to notice changes in economic practices and priorities even if the texts are, of course, of exemplary status only.

By carefully reading and thoroughly discussing the texts, we wanted to learn about the different ways "utility" has been and still is understood and which concepts of the relationship between individual good and common good exist. This approach was supposed to lead us to a deeper understanding of these concepts and of their importance for economics and to appreciate the importance of the ability to analyze texts by approaching them in a methodical way based on economic questions. The reflection of the relationship between one's own well-being and that of a larger group is also conducive to developing valuable soft skills and empathy as a member of society.

We scheduled 90-minute seminar sessions for each week of the term, and we devoted an entire seminar session to each of our selected texts. The texts were arranged so that the disciplinary sources would alternate. All three professors participated (with few exceptions) in all the sessions. All seminar participants were supposed to prepare for the sessions by reading the respective texts. Each seminar participant was responsible for preparing a presentation on one of the texts, working on a team of students from different disciplinary backgrounds (as far as possible). Before we started with student presentations, we had two sessions devoted to the organization of the seminar and two brief introductions to the three professors' disciplinary perspectives. In addition to the texts to be discussed in our seminar sessions, we offered a list of introductory texts on the methods of the disciplines.

A typical seminar session started with the presentation of a team of three students with disciplinary backgrounds in American Studies, Economics, and (due to the small number of students only sometimes) Ancient Greek Studies. The presentation was intended to summarize the key aspects of the text to be discussed in that session and to address our guiding questions. The presentation was evaluated based on its clarity, depth, and accessibility. After the presentation, one of the professors moderated a discussion, encouraging all seminar participants to contribute their thoughts. In the first part, the discussion focused on the guiding questions and the text at hand, and in the second part, the discussion focused on establishing links between the texts and the concepts as seen during the course of

the seminar. We had eleven such sessions in total. As pointed out by Kalis (2023), the traveling of concepts is facilitated when the group meets over an extended period of time.

Ultimately, students wrote seminar papers (which are our evaluation tool) in which they reflected on their own and at least one other discipline with regard to a self-chosen topic related to the class.

We made the seminar available to the students in the different study programs by crediting the course to program-specific modules. None of the modules were obligatory in any of the study programs, which guaranteed voluntary participation in the interdisciplinary format on the part of the students. We administered the course material and established channels for digital communication via our e-learning platform, ILIAS.

CHALLENGES

Already in the planning phase, we noticed the difficulties in understanding the respective disciplinary approaches to our topic (Xu et al. 2022). We realized quickly that it would be necessary to provide a clear focus for the discussions in the seminar, which led us to propose the set of the above-mentioned questions. In this way, the differences in the concepts understood by the seminar participants became apparent, and a joint understanding gradually developed.

We anticipated that seminar participants with a background in American or Greek studies would struggle with mathematical representations. Hence, we kept the level of formalization low and focused on the analyses of texts instead. Nevertheless, we invited the economics students to draw connections between the meaning of concepts and their mathematical representations in their work in the interdisciplinary teams and in their contributions to the discussions in the seminar.

The modules in which we credited our seminar were not entirely compatible with each other, e.g., the mode of examination was not the same for all students. The Economics students' presentations needed to be graded, whereas those of the other students just needed to be passed. Additionally, the seminar culture turned out to be quite different across disciplines, ranging from the standards and expectations of the lecturers to the students' commitment to seminar participation, which, from the Economist's point of view, can be partially explained by the differences in the incentives that accompany the differences in examination modes.

The composition of our seminar group was not balanced across the disciplines, with students from Greek Studies being the smallest and students from North American Studies being the largest group. Due to these unequal group distributions, not all the student teams had members from all disciplines. All the

teams had access to the office hours of all three professors to help them integrate disciplinary perspectives into the preparation of their presentations.

The language used in class was English, as two of the targeted study programs, North American Studies and Economics and Institutions, are taught in English. This choice posed a problem – even if it was not a major issue – for some students in Greek Studies since the language of instruction in Germany is German.

EVALUATION OF METHODOLOGY

Our seminar was opened with brief overviews of what the respective disciplines might be able to contribute to proving effective for everyone and allowing for the recognition of philosophical, cultural, political, and economic implications and their entanglements. A diachronic and interdisciplinary approach in each session forced students and teachers to engage with each other's disciplines and resulted in constant exchange of ideas at all levels.

After each session, our team of professors met to reflect on the students' performance in the presentations, the contributions to the discussion, and the extent to which the goals that we had set were reached. Naturally, the three are interdependent, but our presence in the seminar, the moderation of the discussion by one of us, and our own contributions made up for (occasional) poor performance on the part of the students. All in all, we were satisfied with the interdisciplinary interaction and the extent of learning on our own part and that of the students. Our own contributions to the interdisciplinary dialog facilitated the process of perspective taking, as similarly reported by Diphorn & McGonigle Leyh (2023:41). Regarding our resource investment, our experiences were similar to those reported in van Gogh & Lutz (2023:75), namely, that interdisciplinarity tends to require more time on the part of teachers as well as learners, particularly for the preparation of coursework.

The successful integration of perspectives requires teachers' and students' willingness to go beyond disciplinary boundaries and their mutual respect for disciplinary approaches and conclusions that may be foreign to them. American (and Greek) studies look at texts as historical testimonies to socio-cultural moments in the history of the respective nations and attribute their primary value to their contribution to the understanding of the political and national development of political and national entities that have shaped world history and still do so. Moreover, they take the aesthetic principles of the texts into account as a means to understand how the texts convey their ideas. Economics is rather interested in more abstract mechanisms and concepts that help guide the understanding of human behavior more broadly, detached from the specific context. In all three disciplines, knowledge of the past and awareness of general mechanisms in social interactions

are necessary and helpful tools in the analysis of present-day structures, entanglements, and changes (Brint et al., 2009).

We elicited students' feedback in the last seminar session by means of a reflection on the perceived learning success and on the attainment of the course goals. Students first discussed in small groups, followed by a discussion in the plenum. Almost all seminar participants were present. Most students found the interdisciplinary experience interesting yet challenging. Some students admitted that they would have preferred a more homogenous group setting and dive deeper into their own discipline. Some students from Economics expressed their dissatisfaction with working on a team whose members faced different incentives for performance (Turner et al., 2022).

Ultimately, perhaps the most important insight gained was that C. P. Snow's 1959 two-culture divide could be overcome. The students of the humanities understood that literary, cultural, and philosophical texts can be addressed effectively with economic questions, leading to knowledge that otherwise remains hidden. The students of Economics realized that stories and the practices and purposes of story-telling reveal, if attentively listened to, economic principles on narrative and contextual levels. After all, all economic engagement is engagement between and among human beings. The interaction and exchange of knowledge we experienced in the seminar showed us that common concept bridges between disciplines can be built so that students and teachers are actually able to walk on and cross these bridges. Students ventured into areas that they would not have encountered during their regular studies and, therefore, traveled across disciplinary boundaries and the usual confines of their respective study programs. The metaphor of traveling includes a starting point or exit, a journey, and a return. Students returned to their own disciplines but gathered substantial and hitherto unknown goods to remain within the economic discourse during their journey.

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