



Paradigm shift: Three orientations for economics education after a crash

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Hi! I'm Neil Shanks, Clinical Assistant Professor at Baylor University on the historic lands of the Kitikiti'sh or kirikir'i:s people, specifically the Huaco/Waco whose principal village preceded the settler city that claimed its name. My ultimate goal is to change the world. No matter who or what I teach, I seek to learn more about the world as it is and to critically consider the way it could be. The gap between those things represents a map of what that change should look like. I spend a lot of time thinking and writing about economics education as part of that goal. Frankly, I'm often castigating the way I taught economics as a 12th grade teacher in Texas as I learn about new paradigms and approaches that would have helped me work toward that goal in my high school classroom. Sometimes I probably go overboard in self-criticism, but I am trying to be more generous with my past self. Outside of academic stuff, I enjoy outside stuff. I have a couple of kids and a partner who teaches Public Health at Baylor. I also have a deep and problematic love of college football in all it's vivid artistry and megalomania.

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INTRODUCTION

Crash: to make a loud, clattering noise, as of something dashed to pieces. to break or fall to pieces with noise. (Definition of Crash, n.d.)



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As Noreen Naseem Rodríguez (2020) explained in her working paper on Transformative Justice in Social Studies, the disciplines of social studies have traditionally given form to:

nation-state master narratives that uphold white supremacy and Protestant, middle-class, cisgender, ableist, and heteropatriarchal norms; erase Indigenous sovereignty; champion meritocracy, individualism, and capitalism; depict the U.S. as a global leader of ever-increasing progress and equality; and minimize reflection on the opaqueness of power (p. 3).

As a subdiscipline of social studies, economics education is complicit in that project. Economics as a field is resoundingly White (Bayer & Rouse, 2016; Francis & Opoku-Agyeman, 2020), male (Flaherty, 2018; Lundberg, 2016), and steadfastly adheres to colonial frameworks (Benería et al., 2016; Zein-Elabdin, 2010) that fly in the face of a critical and humanizing approach to social studies education (Shanks, 2020a). Perhaps because of this reliably unjust foundation, the discipline of economics holds an outsized importance in a world marked by injustice.

Economic policies shape our world without democratic input by creating an “econocracy” where economic policy questions are left to unelected experts (Earle et al., 2016), economic decision making occurs without attention to ethics or values (Nelson, 2016), and economic reasoning reciprocates white, western epistemologies and ontologies (Grapard & Lewiston, 2011) even as this reasoning continually fails to predict economic crises (Cameron & Siegmann, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice uprisings, the Great Recession, the climate crisis, and the dot-com bubble all represent ‘crashes’ in the sense that they were loud, clattering noises that should turn our attention to the failures of traditional approaches to economics. Yet despite some recent scholarly work on how we should reassess K-12 economic education in this era (Adams, 2019a; Bigelow et al., 2014; Davis & Crowley, 2017; King & Finley, 2015; Wright-Maley & Davis, 2016), economics curriculum has largely failed to reckon with the material realities of a post-crash world (Adams, 2019a; Kim, 2018).

Thus, economics educators must be prepared to grapple with the full complexity of a discipline steeped in dehumanizing frameworks and practices if they are to pursue a transformative, humanizing, active social studies (Adams, 2019a; Shanks, 2020a, 2020b). My contention is that we cannot explore this complexity without a complete and utter revolution in the way we think of economics. As teachers and researchers in economics education, we must emerge from the shell that has circumscribed the acceptable economic tools at our disposal. We must consider the ways that this shell has marginalized our students, and build a new framework that is student-centered, grounded in lived reality, and challenges the structures that encased us in the shell in the first place. In short, we need a paradigm shift.

The Research Orientation #1

Crash: (of moving vehicles, objects, etc.) to collide, especially violently and noisily. (Definition of Crash, n.d.)



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If we know one thing about economics education as a component of social studies, it is that teachers are unprepared to teach it (Ayers, 2019; Miller & Vanfossen, 2008; Walstad & Watts, 2015). But if, as stated above, the foundations of the discipline are suspect, what should we do in the face of that lack of preparation? Through my research, I have tried to expand our notions of what counts as economics, specifically challenging the neoclassical paradigm that functions as the official knowledge in economics education Adams (2019a). While an explicit critique of neoclassical economics may be valuable at times (Shanks, 2018), and it may even be worth considering how to address critical issues within existing neoclassical frameworks (Shanks, 2017; Shanks & Hall, 2020), I've recently focused more on ways to include alternative paradigms and ways of thinking about economics in order to pursue the dual-purpose of better preparing economics teachers while offering more humanizing and transformative perspectives in the discipline.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Orientation #2

Crash: a sudden loud noise, as of something being violently smashed or struck.
(Definition of Crash, n.d.)

As a K-12 economics teacher, I didn't even realize that there were such things as paradigms of economic thought. I taught an exclusively neoclassical curriculum out of sheer ignorance of other possibilities. Any alternatives that might have challenged the existing orthodoxy (Fischer et al., 2017) were outside the bounds of what I was exposed to in my high school AP Macroeconomics class and singular undergraduate microeconomic course (see Dozono, 2022 for a counter-example). Encountering these perspectives later in my career has been a revelation, as they continually challenge many of the commonsense assumptions I was taught (and uncritically passed on to my students). For example, feminist economics (Hewitson, 1999) confronts the presupposition that all human beings are rational pleasure machines, insatiably pursuing self-satisfaction (Krutka & Milton, 2020). Institutional economics allows us to consider the role of race as a structure of power in economic theory (Pouncy, 2001). Ecological economics asks us to consider the economy as something within the environment, rather than theorizing the environment as something to be exploited and consumed (Spash & Asara, 2017). If we start from these paradigms, rather than traditional approaches, we have the opportunity to, for example, rethink scarcity as a fundamental problem in economics, explore the role of race and discrimination in property rights, and inform civic action to protect the environment while maintaining a just foundation for humanity.

Another way to conceptualize a paradigm is simply a manner of thinking. We often ask our students to "think like economists" (Ayers, 2019), but I have tried to show that the economists that we often seek to have our students "think like" compose only a narrow ideological band on the full spectrum of economic thought. There are economists who think communally (Ostrom, 2015), those that think with religious principles in mind (El-Diwany, 2003; Hay, 2004; Zsolnai, 2007), and those that consider the rhetoric of economics as worthy

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of study ([McCloskey, 1998](#)). Thinking like economists, as a goal of economic education, should necessarily include these thinkers as well, particularly if we desire a powerful and authentic social studies education [Shanks \(2020b\)](#).

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

Orientation #3

Crash: characterized by an intensive effort, especially to deal with an emergency, meet a deadline, etc. (Definition of Crash, n.d.)

In previous work, I have offered lesson and unit ideas for teaching critical economics through new economic paradigms and ways of thinking ([Shanks, 2017, 2020a, 2020b; Shanks & Hall, 2020](#)). Rather than recount those here, I will offer a few core principles of critical economics that I think might be of value to educators seeking an alternative to the traditional economic way of thinking.

START WITH YOUR STUDENTS

Your students' lives, beliefs, and experiences are all economic! Asking your students about what they do, the choices they make, and their experiences in the economy seems simple, but because so much of traditional economic curriculum is unrealistic and impersonal ([Adams, 2019b](#)), it is truly revolutionary to build your curriculum from the results. You may find, for example, that they often make choices that are communal in nature; sharing and collaborating with friends even when it might have been personally advantageous to work individually. Their religious beliefs might instruct them to sacrifice themselves for the good of others in an 'irrational' manner. They may have also experienced discrimination, environmental racism, or non-monetary labor that would open a conversation on how power might manifest in the economy or present opportunities to take action. A deep understanding of your students' funds of knowledge ([Gonzalez et al., 2006](#)) allows for a more humanizing approach to economics education.

BOTTOM UP, NOT TOP DOWN

Related to the idea of starting with your students, it is possible to build economic theory inductively by using your students' experiences to theorize about economics. This contrasts with the common deductive approach where we apply preexisting theory to the real world and assure students that any time theory doesn't match reality, some unimportant externality is at play. Imagine students participating in qualitative research, where they interview members of the community on their experiences in the economy. They could then share their results and develop theories about how the economy works based on this data. Their findings might be more realistic than the supply and demand charts that so often serve as an embodiment of economic theory and would also illustrate to students their agency in naming the world around them ([Freire, 1993](#)) and giving them the power to change it.



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CRITIQUE OFFICIAL KNOWLEDGE

I can hear the questions now: “But how do you do all of that with the demands of existing standards?”, “What about our district curriculum map?”, “Won’t somebody think of the standardized tests?”. Even as I pose this last question facetiously, I acknowledge the real dilemmas teachers face in a school system designed to dehumanize students. One way around this dilemma is to use the standards, frameworks, and assessments as points of reference to compare to the data and inventory your students collect about their own lives and the community around them. Asking questions about who or what is missing; whose interests are served in the extant curriculum; what contextual factors influence the nature of these documents will hone your students’ critical dispositions and give them the opportunity to develop the political and ideological clarity (Bartolomé, 2004) necessary for economics education to be transformative.

If economic education is to live up to its potential to address the myriad problems facing the world in the wake of this or any future crash, we must break free of traditional boundaries in economics education. We cannot remain wedded to outdated models and incomplete theories that ignore our students lived experiences and leave dominant narratives in the discipline unexamined. We need to reorient our curriculum, our practices, and our purposes for teaching economics. We need a paradigm shift.

Q & A WITH NEIL SHANKS

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

I am wondering if you could provide an example of a single economic problem that is examined through the different paradigms you mentioned in the article?

Neil Shanks's Response:

Sure! I like to think of different paradigms as unique tools, and as anyone doing handiwork knows, different jobs require different tools (often more than one tool for each job!). Using only neoclassicism is like restricting yourself to a hammer. It’s fine when you need to nail something in but doesn’t offer a lot of utility when you are plumbing. So, let’s approach an economic problem like persistently high unemployment. Our neoclassical hammer might say that there is an interaction between the supply of labor and the price of wages. That might explain some of the problem! But we might also use an institutional approach to look at differences between White and Black unemployment rates, seeing how White high school dropouts have a lower unemployment rate than Black graduates. That throws a wrench (pun intended) into our simple supply and demand analysis.

We might also use a feminist approach to look at childcare costs that inhibit women’s participation in the work force, and how we undervalue the care work that women disproportionately provide. I was always confused as a student about why “full employment” did not equal 0% unemployment. Rhetorical analyses might allow us to consider this “reserve

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army of the unemployed” as fundamental to limiting the power of workers. Likewise ecological economics could question whether the growth that might ensue due to full employment would strain the planet’s resources and make better cost/benefit calculations about the type of jobs needed in a given economy. All of these approaches are unique tools to address the problem of unemployment. The cool thing is they not only offer unique approaches, but they might lead to different forms of civic action in response to student understandings, which will inevitably lead to new questions, problems, and further work.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

How might you suggest I talk to my administration or my department about undertaking a different approach to teaching economics?

Neil Shanks's Response:

I think changing our approach to teaching economics is an important endeavor for a variety of reasons and knowing which to emphasize requires understanding your administration and department well. I think you could make the case that this approach is ‘cutting edge’ in the sense that many of these approaches are newly developed and scholars are pushing boundaries in this growing field. I think you can make the case that this approach responds to current events and trends, particularly The Great Recession which was an instigating event for much of the work around Rethinking Economics (which I’ll mention in the final question on resources). I think you can make the case that this is relevant to students’ lives and experiences, and accounts for the unique facets of their identity in ways that neoclassicism doesn’t, thus advancing goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. And I think you can make the case that this is ethically and morally the right thing to do in a world that is unequal and unjust. The approach you take may depend on whether your administration or department is more likely to hear an argument on innovation, relevance, diversity, or social justice!

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

I worry about how students might be penalized on standardized tests like the AP exam, Test of Economic Literacy, or International AS/A-level Economics when test assessors may not recognize as valid, or even know about, these paradigmatic differences?

Neil Shanks's Response:

You are right that standardized measures of economic knowledge are beholden to the status quo. One response to that worry stems from my work teaching US History in Texas, a state that is rigidly adherent to standards and testing in ways that promote a narrow version of American history (and other disciplines of social studies!). I found that many of my stu-

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dents actually learned the state's version of history better when presented with the counter narrative alongside it. For example, they were far more likely to remember the ins and outs of the Spanish-American War when we talked about the Cuban fight for independence, the 25th Infantry, and Filipino resistance as counterstories to the grand narrative of American Expansion.

This outcome may seem counter-intuitive if you conceptualize students' brains as finite buckets to fill with required content. However, I push back on that "banking" approach and believe our students are discerning enough to understand that the curriculum in the standards and tests is not the complete story. They are seeing and living a world that belies a lot of the myths in the standard curriculum and it frankly makes more sense to them to learn that there is a reason for the juxtaposition between the world as it is and as it is presented to them. This takes time, and admittedly, may not work in all contexts, but it builds trust between you and your students and leads to a more relevant curriculum that enhances engagement.

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

In your experience, how have students with differing degrees of privilege responded to teaching economics in the way you are suggesting?

Neil Shanks's Response:

That's a good question, and I think it's a really meaningful consideration because privilege obviously extends into so many facets of identity. In economics, we may think of social class as the primary spectrum of privilege but, as many of these alternatives posit, our race, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, and other intersecting identities matter in economics as well. As a teacher, I want my students to explore all of their identity, and as I learn about them, I can start to craft lessons that reflect their identities and lived experiences. I currently teach at a private, Christian institution which means my students skew whiter, wealthier and more religious than the overall population of our state. These are all aspects of identity that carry privilege in America. Yet, by exploring bedrock Christian teachings on wealth and care for others, we generally get to a pretty critical place when it comes to racial inequality, wealth distribution, and justice. That's just one example, and our students are not monolithic, but an intersectional approach does help to navigate some potential resistance to critical perspectives.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

What resources do you suggest teachers can refer to if they want to start learning about shifting their understandings or practices?



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Neil Shanks's Response:

My understanding of new economic paradigms has been greatly shaped by the work of the Rethinking Economics group out of the UK. Their eponymous book, *Rethinking Economics: An Introduction to Pluralist Economics*, is a really readable overview of nine different economic paradigms, providing about 15 pages of descriptions for each, with comparisons to neoclassicism. If you are looking for a more practical 'textbook' to implementing pluralism in your classroom, you might look to *Introducing a New Economics: Pluralist, Sustainable and Progressive* which takes students through an entire economics class using a variety of paradigms to better understand our world and how to address contemporary economic issues.

If you prefer online resources, www.exploring-economics.org/en/ is a good site to get an overview of economic paradigms, and the Rethinking Economics team produced a free e-textbook (<https://www.economystudies.com/book/>) that is a great way to structure a class. I have also drawn a lot on the collective work of the Diversifying and Decolonising Economics group (<https://d-econ.org/>), which puts out great reading lists and spotlights thinkers who have been systemically excluded from mainstream economics. Their audience is largely for higher-ed so it takes some translation to bring it to a K-12 level. This is really what I've tried to do in looking at approaches to economic education, so I've referenced a few of my own pieces throughout. Particularly the "Starting Points Matter" (Shanks, 2020a) and "Thinking Like Which Economists" (Shanks, 2020b) articles break down these paradigms and offer teaching ideas. For example, in "Starting Points Matter" I use feminist economics as a springboard into a lesson that critiques our individualist approaches to scarcity; institutional economics to set up a lesson on race and property rights in the US; and ecological economics to explore Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics, a metaphor for finding an appropriate level of sustainability and social welfare while not overburdening the environment. In "Thinking Like Which Economists," I write about communal, religious, and rhetorical economists who aren't usually included when we tell students to 'think like an economist'. These ideas augment lessons that use Legos to explore communalism, Monopoly to teach religious tenets related to economics, and journaling and simulations to teach the power of storytelling in our economic lives.

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