

## **Bridging Theory and Practice: “Exploring Economics” as an Incubator for New Economic Thinking**

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### **Abstract**

Disappointed by the one-sided approach to economics teaching at most universities, students and young scholars created the online learning platform Exploring Economics, a virtual university for pluralism in economics. The platform’s mission is to offer an alternative to neoclassical teaching by presenting theories of different schools of thought. It has a unique way to systematize the diversity of economic approaches by comparing theories based on their philosophical and epistemological differences. The platform consolidates materials such as videos, graphics and texts which allow a creative analysis of economic issues surrounding inequality, financial crises, money, and the environment, to name a few. However, the platform’s strength is a vital offline community. We encourage students all over the world to become active in editor working groups or in organizing writing workshops, and we are building links to universities at the institutional level. Exploring Economics strives to enrich economic teaching as well as to promote self-criticism, reflection and openness. This new economic thinking is critical not only to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the economy, but also to ensure a sustainable future for planet and people. Today’s students will be the entrepreneurs, teachers, scholars and policy-makers of tomorrow, shaping our economy and society.

### **Introduction**

Exploring Economics – a free, open access, bottom-up digital learning platform for new economic thinking – offers a solution to one-sided and narrow-minded teaching in economics at universities around the globe. We respond to the international call of students and scholars for a change in economics, which has become all the more important in light of the insufficient answers that mainstream economic scholarship provided during the global economic and financial crisis. Exploring Economics was created *by* students and young scholars *for* students and aims to bring about lasting, positive change in teaching economics and to eventually transform society and the economy.

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Since its launch in December 2016, Exploring Economics has counted 324,270 page views from 197 countries. By cooperating with universities and co-hosting two summer schools, we have extended our reach and provided a platform for students and early-stage researchers to discuss and publish their writings. We organized international writing workshops on pluralist economics that allowed students and researchers to interact and network while producing relevant content for Exploring Economics. The platform generated very positive feedback from students, scholars, and others around the globe and received excellent media coverage in Germany. We have received the trust and financial support of different partners as well as 237 people who donated for our successful crowdfunding campaign.

Our goal is to increase the scope and impact of Exploring Economics in shifting economic education away from its primarily neoclassical orientation towards a diversity of perspectives, theories, methods and topics. Therefore, we focus on the following four objectives.

**Objective 1: To increase the quantity of available material on diverse theories and topics in economics.**

In full, the learning platform aggregates 335 materials in the discover section, 69 courses in the study section as well as 13 infographics and 20 introduction articles (each ten articles in German and English) in the orientation section at the end of August 2018. The new uploaded learning material covers a broad variety of underrepresented economic topics and concepts, such as Post-Keynesian, Marxian, Ecological or Feminist Economics.

There is a growing segment of self-provided content in the “discover” section produced during writing workshops and seminars. In order to foster dialogue between heterodox and orthodox approaches, and to encourage interdisciplinary approaches, we organized writing workshops on “A new Critique of the new Mainstream” and “Socio-Ecological Economics” in March 2018 (see more details here <https://www.exploring-economics.org/en/participate/> and below). We are expecting about 20 essays from these writing workshops that will be uploaded to the discover section.

The daily traffic on the webpage fluctuates between 200 and 600 sessions. The total number of 62,832 sessions from January 1 to July 31 2018 leads to an average number of 258 sessions per day. We are especially pleased about our high-ranking introductory articles at google search. If google users are searching for “neoclassical economics”, “post Keynesian” or “free trade theory”, the introductory articles on Exploring Economics will be featured on the first page.

Despite regular updates of the webpage with quality content, we would like to increase and stabilize inflow of new material suggestions in the future. As will be pointed out in more detail below (objective 2) the international voluntary team of editors and material scouts is fluctuating, and with them, the number of suggested and newly produced learning material. We are revising our processes to make it

more intuitive and motivating to suggest new material and easier to edit and upload the suggested material.

Our main activity in order to increase the content and the user base of the webpage is the translation of Exploring Economics to Spanish and French. The translation to French is currently ongoing on a voluntary basis and is scheduled to be done by the end of the year (though the technical implementation of the translated webpage will be going on until mid-2019).

Moreover, we will hold a web development workshop in 2018 to identify future possibilities to develop the webpage on a technical level and to make it more user friendly. With the combined effect of different participation formats (outlined in detail below), the translations as well as further technical developments of the webpage, we are confident that we can increase the daily traffic of the webpage to 400 sessions per day until the end of 2018 and 600 sessions until the end of 2019.

**Objective 2: To strengthen the free, open-access, and bottom-up approach of the learning platform.**

Drawing from our experience as an activist-driven movement, the bottom-up character of the e-learning platform is of key importance to us. In fact, we see Exploring Economics as much as an “offline” campaign as an online platform.

In order to expand our interaction with users and invite them to propose new content, we started to build an international team of voluntary editors for Exploring Economics. As an immediate response to an advertising campaign to become an editor for Exploring Economics in 2017, about 50 editors from all over the world were active temporarily. However, we were not able to secure the long-term-commitment of many volunteers, so that at the end of August 2018 only 22 editors are actively communicating, suggesting or editing new material.

Since the international community of students and lecturers that actively uses and promotes Exploring Economics is a key lever for success in our theory of change, we put high effort in revising the editor concept in the last months. The new concept envisages three stages of the editor work that make it easier for volunteers to choose their level of engagement.

In order to win new editors, we started to build up promotional partnerships with like-minded organizations such as Rethinking Economics, oikos, the Young Scholars Initiative or sneep. The long-term aim is that these organizations develop ownership and motivate volunteers to become active for Exploring Economics in their respective communities (via social media, webpage, newsletter, etc. – see here the new representation of Exploring Economics on the Rethinking Economics webpage: [https://www.rethinkeconomics.org/exploring\\_economics/](https://www.rethinkeconomics.org/exploring_economics/)). In addition to that, we actively promoted Exploring Economics among students and young scholars, e.g. at the spring assembly of the Network

for Pluralism in May, at the 2nd Summer Academy for Pluralist Economics or the European Gathering by Rethinking Economics (both in August).

In addition, we revised our concept of involving volunteers and student groups from the German speaking Network for Pluralist Economics and the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics, with the possibility to do an internship at Exploring Economics as one of the innovations.

Supporting teams in hosting writing workshops is another key tool for involving users and strengthening the bottom-up approach of Exploring Economics. Therefore, we developed a guide, which is constantly evolving and based on the experience of the organizational teams. It serves to convey the idea of the writing workshop, to provide assistance and suggestions to the organizing team and to ensure a high quality of the workshops. Two associated groups of the Network for Pluralist Economics organized the writing workshops "Socio-Ecological Economics" (2. - 4. March 2018 in Vienna) and "A new Critique of the new Mainstream" (9. - 11. March 2018 in Berlin) in cooperation with Exploring Economics. The Berlin group currently plans a subsequent writing workshop about „A new Critique of the new Mainstream“ for March 2019 in cooperation with the Cusanus University in Bernkastel-Kues, also coordinated by Exploring Economics. The results of the first workshop will be presented in a workshop during the general meeting of the Network for Pluralist Economics and analyzed with regard to possible links to strategic activities of the association. Additionally, we are currently working on concepts for two more writing workshops with two other groups from Germany and North-America. In cooperation with the German group, we are trying to anchor the general idea of hosting writing workshops within the scholarship program of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which will facilitate future cooperation with scholarship holders and possibly funding of the workshops.

As pointed out above, we intend to monitor and streamline the production of learning material in the aftermath of writing workshops in the future. The small number of already published essays reflects the lengthiness of the writing process that takes place after the actual workshop and the difficulties of supporting it from a distance. In order to meet the claim of the bottom-up approach, the support of the essay writers was left to the responsibility of the organizing team. Therefore, there has been no contact between the writers and Exploring Economics' writing workshop coordinator during the process of writing. We underestimated the effort that needs to be taken into monitoring the writing process to make sure participants are able to finish their essays. We recognized this weakness and addressed it by an ongoing survey of participants regarding their writing process with the aim to elaborate on possible approaches of support.

**Objective 3: To promote the implementation of plural economic teaching in the universities.**

Exploring Economics started as an e-learning platform that mainly targets students of economics and neighboring disciplines. However, as lecturers and teachers are a key agent of change, we started to build links to universities with the aim to anchor Exploring Economics in teaching.

From September to December 2018, we will run the exchange program “Pluralist Economics Fellowship” with the Minerva Schools at KGI (Minerva University). Undergraduate students of Minerva University will have the chance to apply for this fellowship during their stay in Berlin. The selected students suggest new materials, produce essays and dossiers for Exploring Economics, and will in turn earn academic credit at their home institution. With 10 students participating, we expect about 2 dossiers and 8 essays to be produced during the exchange program.

For the winter term 2018/19, we agreed for a similar cooperation with Cusanus University. Economics students will have the opportunity to write essays for Exploring Economics as part of their master seminars. The essay will count as an academic performance in the master program, while excellent essays at the same time will be published on Exploring Economics. We expect at least 4 essays to be produced until April 2019.

In August 2018, the second international Exploring Economics Summer Academy for Pluralist Economics took place with about 90 participants and 20 lectures. It’s a joint event by the Network for Pluralist Economics and Protestant Academy of Thuringia supported by the Young Scholar Initiative (Institute for New Economic Thinking), Macroeconomic Policy Institute (Hans-Böckler-Foundation), Club of Rome and supported by several public funded organizations and different (political) foundations.

Besides that, we received feedback from lecturers that made experiences in using Exploring Economics in teaching, such as Jun. Prof. Svenja Flechtner from University of Siegen, Dr. Robert Lepenies from the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research, and Julian Becker, Doctoral Re-searcher at the University of Duisburg-Essen. These lecturers mainly referred to the orientation section of the website and spoke positively about the infographics and introduction articles that they either used directly in teaching or referred to as literature.

We presented Exploring Economics at national and international conferences in order to spread the project in the expert community. Until August 2018, we were present and presented at the European Gathering of ISIFE in Brussels (26+27.4), the Reshaping Economics conference in Tutzing (27-29.4), at the 3. Pluralist Economics Workshop by the Hans-Böckler-Foundation (6-9.6.) and at the International Summer Gathering by Rethinking Economics (11-17.8.).

Even though we were successful in building links to universities and spreading the e-learning platform among lecturers, we are facing challenges in anchoring the Exploring Economics material in teaching. It is difficult to make inroads to the highly standardized and closed system of teaching that is dominated by a few publishers, which do not only provide textbooks and exercise books, but also slides and examination modules.

As a first attempt to bind lecturers more closely to Exploring Economics, we developed a concept for the creation of content in the discover section that is produced primarily for and by teachers. We will spread the possibility of creating new formats for teachers among our networks and at conferences, e.g. at the annual conference of the Association for Socioeconomic Education and Research (ASEER) (21-22 February 2019) at the University of Duisburg-Essen or the conference “Education Power Future. Learning for the socio-ecological transformation” on the same weekend at the University of Kassel.

Another future project for anchoring Exploring Economics in teaching is currently in planning stage at the university of Duisburg-Essen. In 2019, the Institute for Socioeconomics will produce an introductory Master’s Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) using Exploring Economics content.

**Objective 4: To overcome the Global North bias in content and project team.**

Exploring Economics receives visitors from all over the world. However, there is still a significant Global North bias. About 70% of the users for the time span January-July 2018 are based in the Global North (Japan, Australia and New Zealand included). Only about 3% of the users stem from central and southern America; 12% stem from African countries.

At the same time, these numbers show that Exploring Economics can reach a global audience in principle. It is motivating to see, for instance, that about 4700 users from India and 3700 users from Nigeria have visited the website since its launch, without any networks or advertising in these countries.

We developed a concept with the aim to use this potential via building institutional links with universities from the global south, thereby involving students. Currently, about 10 editors from the Global South are active for Exploring Economics. We intend to increase this number via promotional partnerships and institutional cooperation with organizations that are located in or have ties to the Global South.

As a first step to overcome the Global North bias in the content of Exploring Economics, we developed a topic list for essays and dossiers that features issues and theories related to the global south in particular. We want to foster a writing workshop on critical developmental and post-development perspectives in 2019.

## **Current Progress and achieved goals**

In objective 1, we successfully extended the content of the learning platform, though we would like to increase the number of suggested and newly produced material in the future. The average daily traffic of the e-learning platform is currently below the 400 mark that we aim for by the end of 2018. A key factor for the reach of the website seems to be its embeddedness in the German-speaking and international pluralism community. In our current user evaluation with about 70 participants, 60% declared that they had taken notice of Exploring Economics via the Network for Pluralist Economics or a similar group, 30% via social media and 15% via google search. An advantage for success could be to win other organizations to develop ownership for the project and win supporters for it in their respective communities. A factor we have only limited influence on is our social media and search engine reach. We are facing difficulties in increasing our social media reach; as an education-centered organization without explicitly political and opinion-based statements, it is difficult to provoke a reaction from users and to attract attention.

In objective 2, we were able to strengthen the bottom-up approach via inviting editors, facilitating writing workshops and promoting Exploring Economics among students. However, we see the need to increase our base of volunteers and multipliers substantially in order to extend the content of the website and to reach our long-term project goals. Though we took several measures to motivate long-term voluntary commitment, we are confronted with its fluctuating and inconstant nature. Another obstacle that we find uneasy to influence is the virtual character of the Exploring Economics community. It is difficult to create a sustainable feeling of connectedness via online tools of communication. In the face of these structural problems of remote and voluntary work we consider institutional cooperation as a solution (e.g. via providing academic credit for voluntary editors in cooperation with universities).

In objective 3, as in objective 1 and 2, we can rely on our profound institutional networks. We intend to deepen these networks in the future via building long-term partnerships and promoting Exploring Economics among multipliers at international conferences. However, we see difficulties in motivating educators to use our learning material in a large scale and to substantially transform the economics curriculum. We have received the feedback that the infographics and other website contents are difficult to be directly implemented in teaching. We aim to prepare existing website content for teaching, increase the amount of newly generated content by and for teachers and promote Exploring Economics at relevant conferences. Additionally, we plan to organize a workshop with lecturers and didactics experts in 2019 to develop teaching solutions that find their way into education.

In objective 4, a key factor of our already global reach is the international nature of the movement for Pluralism in Economics we are embedded in. For this reason, we have intensified our ties to Rethinking Economics and their global network of associated groups. It became apparent that it was the right decision to set up the website as bilingual from the start in order to reach an English speaking audience. We think that the translations into Spanish and French will be another key factor for reaching users from the Global South. On the other hand, we have to critically reflect that the largest part of our users, supporters, editors and writing workshop organizers stem from Europe, especially from Germany and Austria. We are facing with a structural marginalization of the global south in mainstream economics and the movement for Pluralist Economics itself, which represents an obstacle we cannot overcome by ourselves.