

On educating people to be economically active. Reflexive economic education and Theme-Centered Interaction as humanist relatives

*Zur Bildung wirtschaftender Menschen. Reflexive
Wirtschaftspädagogik und Themenzentrierte Interaktion als
humanistische Verwandte*

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Georg Tafner and Marc Casper teach vocational school teachers in economics and administration at Berlin's Humboldt University. Rather than introduce others to systems without reflection, they endeavour to encourage students to critically examine the economy and their own role in it. Their "reflexive economic education" is similar in attitude and method to Theme-Centered Interaction, particularly by virtue of the principle of "dynamic balance" and the goal of supporting enlightened, self-determined economic "chairpersons" in their roles as employees, consumers and economic citizens. The article highlights connections and provides suggestions for working with humanistic approaches to economic education.

Humanism and economics – a contradiction?

As business educators who support students on their path to a teaching career in economics, business, and administrative vocational training, we are faced with an integration task that is noticeable on an almost daily basis: anyone who works in education deals with people and will not get very far without a humanistic attitude. However, when it comes to economic issues, we often have to ask ourselves how this can really fit together and what we can do to integrate "economics" and "education" in a humanistic way. After all, there are several reasons why humanism and economics can be perceived as contradictory:

1) In public discourse, "the economy" is repeatedly judged to be immoral and inhumane: this is substantiated by scandals, selfish behaviour or the exploitation of people, animals and nature in management and corporate contexts. The outrage about this documents that "the economy" is held to a moral standard that includes a minimum level of decency and humanity. Countless people in business actually put this into practice – it's just that their actions don't make the headlines as often.

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2) We live in a highly individualised and economised society: the economy plays a dominant role and is determined by instrumental rationality. At the same time, "there is a considerable degree of irrationality inherent in abstract rationality and its 'obsession' with translating all qualities of existence into numerical values" (Vietta, 2012, p. 11, translated by ...), which also leads to "the destruction and eradication of other cultures and natural spaces" (ibid., p. 39). This attitude manifests itself in the pursuit of making the world "calculable, controllable, predictable, available" through "scientific knowledge, technical mastery, political control, economic efficiency, etc." (Rosa, 2020, p. 46). Accordingly, the efficient use of fake news, half-truths and lies can also become factors for success.

3) Economisation is deeply rooted in our education system: In economics textbooks and introductory courses in business and economics programmes, a neoclassical economic mindset prevails, which assumes profit and utility maximisation and refers to this as (economic) rationality (Schweitzer-Krah and Engartner, 2019). This form is often presented as the correct or even the only plausible form of "economic activity". The problem with this is that it leaves no room for morality or humanity. The business ethicist Ulrich (2005) describes this rationality as an "economic aspect", and an aspect is only part of the whole. A comprehensive, reasonable economic decision also includes social, political and moral aspects (Tafner, 2024). However, the egoistic pursuit of maximum benefit has not only become the prevailing economic concept, but also a general ethical idea that legitimises egoism and breaks with traditional ethical concepts (Tafner, 2020).

Against this backdrop, we as economic educators are faced with the fundamental question of how people should be socialised and taught with regard to economic issues and what educational opportunities would be beneficial for life.

Reflexive economic education as a humanistic approach

Economic education is the academic discipline that deals with vocational and general economic education and training. Our most important task in our team at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin is to train teachers for vocational schools in the fields of economics and administration. There are different trends, approaches and self-conceptions within economic education (Tafner, 2017). We write explicitly from our perspective, which we refer to as "reflexive business education." It is characterised pedagogically by its critical-reflexive, humanistic understanding and its focus on people as active subjects (Tafner, 2015; 2023). Two directions emerge for us:

Firstly, all economic activity must be understood as human, because it is always people who engage in economic activity. Even if machines take over some tasks, human decisions and actions are always behind them. We can understand the economy in terms of totality (everything is shaped by and connected to the economy) and define "economic activity" as a fundamentally human and therefore cultural phenomenon. In doing so, we reject the idea that economic activity is something natural that must not be interfered with, as if it were a vulnerable ecosystem. Rather, we believe that the economy, as a human-made culture, can always be shaped.

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Secondly, we do not understand 'human' in the sense of a single specific understanding of culture. We are not concerned here, for example, with so-called 'neo-humanism' as discussed in pedagogy (and as it was certainly significant for the emergence of economic education). We are concerned with humanity in a much more fundamental sense, which respects human dignity and aims at human rights and the good in people (Kremer and Naeve-Stoß and Tafner, 2024). It is about an 'economy that serves life' (Ulrich, 2008), which seeks to take into account the well-being of the individual and their pursuit of freedom (individual ethics) as well as the common good and the pursuit of justice (social ethics). It is about an economy that combines expertise with character (virtue and aspiration ethics) (Tafner, 2024). In order to implement this in our courses, we draw on ethical concepts and humanistic psychology.

If education is taken seriously, it is about the subject's engagement with the world and, therefore, also with the other subjects. The subject should be allowed and enabled to form a picture of this world. The concept of education is therefore just as much about the "relationship of the subject to the world" (Fromm, 1941/2020, p. 15) as it is in humanistic psychology. It is not only the satisfaction of drives that plays a role here, but also the relationship between the subject and society. It is neither about purely instinctual depth psychology, as a "will to pleasure" (Freud), nor about the "will to power" (Adler), but about "height psychology" as a "will to meaning" (Frankl, 1992/2023, p. 83 f.).

The four-factor model of theme-centred interaction also picks up on this complex integration of the subject: every "I" is connected to an "it", a thing or task to which it can relate, and to the "we", its community, embedded in the "globe", the common context, the common world (Kügler and Spielmann, 2025).. In our understanding, the four-factor model of TCI reflects anthropological factors, which means that it can be linked to the concept of "maturity [...] as self-competence, [...] as professional competence [...] and as social competence" (Roth, 1971, p. 180). These dimensions of competence continue to guide vocational education and training to this day. They converge in the concept of "vocational competence", which is decisive for the educational mandate and framework curricula of vocational schools (KMK, 2021).

One axis of the four-factor model that is particularly relevant to business is the tension between "I" and "we". It is also referred to as the axis of "encounter" (Zitterbarth, 2025) and spelled out as follows: The subject is both an individual and, at the same time (and inseparably!), a social being. This point is crucial for educational action.

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As an individual being, the subject has a consciousness that no one else can access. In the best case, it becomes aware of itself and others, or as stated in the chairperson postulate of TCI: "Lead yourself consciously: look inside yourself to see what you want and should do, and outside to see what is there, and decide between all the circumstances what you want to do and how you want to do it" (Cohn, 2016, p. 214). The acting subject is thus capable of autonomy and at the same time capable of solidarity. It is responsible for its own life, but it also needs other people to live. It was born because others conceived it, and it responds – in most cases – to the name that others have given it. Only through love and care can humans develop into subjects. Humans are only viable because (or insofar as) they have social backup and an infrastructure maintained by others. These interrelationships of mutual provision are also economic phenomena!

As social beings, subjects learn that they have a responsibility towards themselves, others and the environment. This is possible because subjects perceive each other and, above all, can communicate through language. As a result, they do not develop completely differently within a shared culture and society, because they absorb, internalise and share ideas, expectations and concepts. The subject is therefore also capable of solidarity; it can understand others and empathise with them. And because it is capable of solidarity and autonomy, it is also capable of participation. These three abilities – solidarity, autonomy, and participation – are described in educational theory as maturity (Klafki, 1996). Finally, the subject is also a material being. It has a body (it is embodied) so that it can maintain its consciousness and live. As stated in the first axiom of TCI: "Man is a psycho-biological entity. He is also part of the universe. He is therefore autonomous and interdependent. Autonomy (independence) grows with the awareness of interdependence (interconnectedness)." (Cohn, 2016, p. 120)

Finally, this interdependence also means that humans need resources to sustain life: food, shelter and mobility are material necessities. And the decision as to whether and which resources should be procured can be described as economic activity. Economy is therefore a human condition; no human being can survive without these fundamental decisions and actions. Which choices humans make and how exactly they make them is fundamentally open (Nell-Breuning, 1985). Reflexive economic education aims to ensure that these choices are made consciously and in a way that serves life – and that people are educated in such a way that they can realise this for themselves and others.

Human productivity, responsibility and meaning

Unlike some models of theoretical economics, economic activity in the real world always takes place in a context. People want to contribute to this world; they want to be productive in order to realise their potential and experience themselves as productive – in this we share a basic

assumption of humanistic psychology that when people are at peace with themselves and others, they may be uncomfortable and unadapted, but they are not fundamentally destructive, rather productive. They are equally individualised and socialised, as they recognise or must recognise that their existence is characterised by interdependence, which they must accept and contribute to. Consciousness leads to productivity. To put it bluntly, this attitude could be expressed as follows: "We need not be afraid of being 'mere' homo sapiens" (Rogers, 1983/2018, p. 112).

§4§ So when we talk about productivity, we do not mean efficiency in the narrow economic sense, but rather active involvement, generativity and creative drive. People realise their potential at work and/or outside of work. They want to do something in this world. Ideally, they do this not in isolation from their fellow human beings, but responsibly towards themselves, others, the things and tasks available to them, and their environment. But the subject strives for more: it tries to give meaning to its life and to find answers to the questions that life constantly poses. Human beings are narrative, auto-biographical beings whose zest for life falters when the story they tell themselves about their lives becomes unsatisfactory or even breaks off. Our reflective economic education therefore pursues these three goals equally and in dynamic balance (Tafner 2023): With reference to economic problems and fields of action, in the roles of consumer, (gainfully) employed worker and economic citizen, recognising subjective responsibility and learning to consciously take on and relinquish responsibilities; to find ways and develop skills to live productively (but not necessarily 'efficiently') in harmony with one's own creative drive; reflect on one's own meaning and shape the narrative of one's own life in an auto-biographical manner.

These three levels of objectives are not only very compatible with the TCI's chairperson postulate in terms of mature self-management. They also illustrate the relationship between 'reflection' and 'learning' in the principle of 'becoming aware': 'What does 'becoming aware' mean? Recognising what you are doing and asking why you are doing it. In science, we call this a reflexive approach. This offers an opportunity – namely, the opportunity to learn. After all, if you don't question what you do and why you do it, you can't decide to act differently. If we are not open to alternatives, our response to new problems is often just a copy of what we already know. Fundamentally questioning and experimenting with different answers means regaining freedom and creative power. It offers the opportunity to create new originals in good time, instead of always responding to challenges with tried-and-tested copies (Göpel, 2020, p. 17 f.).

Didactic consequences: How "human" can "human resource management" be taught?

We would like to illustrate how we implement this humanistic relationship between reflective business education and theme-centred interaction in our courses using the example of a human resources seminar entitled "Human Resource Management".

From the perspective of TCI, we are primarily guided by the principle of "dynamic balance.". After all, if the factors "I," "we," "it," and "globe" are equally important for lively learning, it would be inconsistent to hold purely "it" events, even if the tendency toward objectivity and supposed objectivity is naturally dominant at the university. We therefore follow TCI-typical practical knowledge (Langmaack and Braune-Krickau, 2000/2010).

A seminar on "Human Resource Management" does not begin with a lecture on textbook definitions and a systematic overview, but with preparatory biographical reflections in the protected "I": What experiences have I had with superiors and human resources departments so far, what points of contact have I had with "Human Resource Management"? How have I

experienced job interviews, performance reviews, team meetings, and, if applicable, warnings and dismissals, either myself or among my acquaintances?

The seminar then involves an exchange of experiences and a discussion in the "we" mode, initially in small groups and then in a plenary session, about the tasks and challenges in the field of human resource management that are considered relevant. Concerns are formulated, along with what and how the group wants to explore them in greater depth. With the help of the seminar leader, these are compared with the requirements of the study regulations and the social significance of the topic. The "globe" serves as a reality check for the resulting, emerging seminar programme – including the "outer limits" that certain terms and concepts must also be clarified in order to create a common basis for this and further learning.

§5§ The "it" is therefore not given from the outset as an ironclad scientific doctrine, but only takes shape through the pre-reflected concerns and curiosities of the participants – what does "human resource management" mean to these specific people, these learning and acting subjects in the seminar group? And how can science and research contribute to addressing their concerns?

Further methodological principles are phenomenology and dialectics (Tafner and Casper, 2022). Both principles are also familiar to TCI (Reichert, 2019) and can be illustrated using the following example: In human resource management, the focus on "phenomena," things in themselves and individual processes of meaning-making is trained through concrete professional experiences and their analysis in the seminar. Coursework includes, for example, podcast interviews with people with interesting professional backgrounds, which are then analysed and interpreted using categories from the seminar, or personal reflections that precede individual topics. The (non-dogmatic but proven) principle applies: first take your own and others' experiences seriously and learn to verbalise them carefully, then use scientific literature and methods to expand your own patterns of thinking and acting – and, not infrequently, contrast them strongly, as the principle of dialectics demands.

As seminar leaders, we often act as 'devil's advocates' and provoke students with perspectives that are completely contrary to what has been discussed so far. What happens if we turn our (unconsciously) held views of human nature on their head and imagine that, instead of being genuinely productive, no one actually wants to work? What happens when we contrast the perspectives of employees and employers? Is there a scientific theory or political interest that completely contradicts our previous considerations? The current labour policy debates in the daily press provide plenty of food for thought – from unconditional basic income to 'active pensions'.

In doing so, we are also following a principle of political education. Everything that is controversial in the world should also be discussed controversially in an educational event. One of our favourite interventions is therefore to cause cognitive unrest. With sufficient time and support, this usually leads to the achievement of our three objectives: the reflective examination and expansion of one's own meaning structures, the clarification of responsibility towards other legitimate interests, and the development of language and action skills in order to be productive. We believe that enduring the unrest, uncertainty and complexity of the real world and engaging with it in a critical and constructive manner is essential for a fulfilling life. Ultimately, however, this means that people, not only at university, engage in search processes that also reveal their own needs, uncertainties and unfulfilled potential, especially when it comes to economic issues that touch on existential questions such as good work and successful life plans. Learning makes us vulnerable, and being vulnerable is human. It should be allowed and given space, in our private lives anyway, but in our opinion also, or perhaps especially, in an educational context – where, unfortunately, it is often avoided and prevented against a backdrop of pressure to perform and meet expectations. Perhaps this sums up our humanistic concern best: we are

concerned with normalising humanity in educational contexts. Including all the resources and fallibilities that real people bring with them.

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Call-Outs

§1§ We live in a highly economised society which emphasises autonomy much more strongly than solidarity

§2§ We are concerned with humanity that respects human dignity

§3§ The acting subject is capable of autonomy and at the same time capable of solidarity

§4§ People strive to give meaning to their lives

§5§ The "it" is concretised by the pre-reflected concerns of the learners