

Storying Our World: Literary and Pedagogical Perspectives on Human Economics

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Abstract

“Storying Our World” claims that a society’s stories shape reality. With the 2008 Financial Crisis, the developed world narrative of the supremacy of neoliberalism was challenged. In the ten years from 2008—2018 an outpouring of texts by both economists and producers of written and visual media, particularly in the USA and UK, debunk global capitalism as unfair, unethical, and unsustainable. Instead of the primacy of market and finance, they argue for “human economics”: the understanding of the economy as principally concerned with the well-being and sustainability of family, community, and the environment. All these texts employ narrative forms to convey their economic stories, including economic metaphors and images, parables and fables, and in extended dramatic plotlines and case studies. “Storying Our World” thus analyses what literary and media narratives tell us about the choices, priorities, and desires of the „human economy“.

Preliminary research, presented at conferences in Uppsala, Sept.2017, Berlin, May 2018 and Gothenburg, August 2018, has already identified key categories of human economics as identified in work by Harvey, Monbiot, Piketty, Raworth, Rothering, and Sachs, among others (see Bibliography). They include proposing changes to the developed-world economic models, social structures, and socio-cultural beliefs in the following areas:

- a. PERSONHOOD: Community collaboration over individualistic competition;
- b. WEALTH: Well-being over financial wealth;
- c. ECOLOGY: sustainability rather than extraction;
- d. VALUES: generosity rather than greed;
- e. PROGRESS: circular economy rather than eternal growth;
- f. WORK: work-to-live not live-to-work.

While I, as a literary expert, do know English-language literary fiction and visual media that represent these values, this project is founded on the belief that the most powerful stories, and thus those most likely to activate the shift to human economics, are the most popular, international, and mainstream stories. PHÖ English students make an ideal cohort: ‘typical’ millennials, with access to

Anglo-American popular culture, with adequate language competence and professional interest in the pedagogical power of story. Human economists, like proponents of ecological sustainability, all argue for the importance of changing the unsustainable political economy now for the benefit of future generations. Thus, the corpus must be developed by PHOÖ students (and potentially their students), to reflect what stories are meaningful and relevant to the way they see the world.

The pedagogical aspect of “Storying Our World” is the student-led, hands-on experience in creating the corpus, responding to the narratives, and using these texts in the EFL classroom. It works in tandem with the development of the ABC approach to the Cluster Mitte Literature and Cultural Studies Curriculum currently in development at the PHOÖ-JKU by co-teachers Melissa Kennedy, Harald Spann and Ilse Born-Lechleitner (JKU). The ABC Approach: Analysis (A), Book response (B) and Creative response (C) re-orientates the old Bachelor of Arts in English curriculum to the new Bachelor of Education (Lehramts) Teaching English as a Foreign Language curriculum. With an eye to developing the ABC teaching methodology into its own research project, “Storying Our World” offers an opportunity for initial participatory Action Research on the input level, in Proseminar and Seminar courses (Kennedy, Spann, Born-Lechleitner), and on the output level, in Bachelor theses (Kennedy), student-teacher lesson plans in Fachdidaktik Englisch (Spann), and later in feedback from students in their first years of teaching.

The Research Outcomes of the project’s findings are conference presentations, invited lectures, publication of academic articles and a single-authored monograph. Following the initial Action Research into the ABC Method with participation from the Project Team (Spann, Born-Lechleitner), Discet3 partners (Spann, Thomas Wagner, Erwin Gierlinger), and students, I anticipate developing a parallel research project on the ABC Method.

Methodology

- Extensive reading to define the common categories of human economics in current economic criticism and the narratives used to describe them
- With students in PS and SE, establish and analyse a corpus of narratives that respond to these categories in a range of media forms
 - Narratological literary analysis of language, form and content of the corpus (ABC Method ,A’)
 - Reader Response Theory applied to student responses to these texts (ABC Method ,B’)
 - Creativity-based exercises with a didactic interest in teaching these texts in the EFL classroom (ABC Method ,C’)