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Extracts from an interview of Christian Gollier, from April 2017

TIM PHILLIPS
CORE

Christian Gollier was one of the teachers for the first CORE classes [at the Toulouse School of Economics] ... Gollier argues that... CORE’s main advantage compared to a traditional syllabus is that he can teach students about how to solve economic problems, using principles, measurement and observation, rather than losing them in abstract ideas. ‘When our students take their first course, most are not good at mathematics. So they focus on this, and they forget all about the purpose of economics,’ he says. ‘Instead, we should try to explain to students what economics is, what our methodology is. Let’s show them as many practical examples as possible. If you try to study economics just by learning mathematics, you don’t get even one minute of excitement out of any course.’

... Also, CORE frees undergraduate from the problem that it repeats the same topics, in exactly the same order, each year. ‘You don’t always need to start with Walrasian supply and demand,’ he says, ‘We need to ask ourselves how boring student life is when we teach the same topics four times, with a little bit more complexity in the mathematics each time. It’s time for a change.’

... Gollier prefers to introduce the subject with as many examples as possible of how economic data and experiments, applied to simple models, helps to describe the world that students experience (he’d like to see even more data and experimentation in CORE’s course material, he admits). This year he used some of his classroom time to show how theory might not always match their real-world experience — but to use this as a way to spark their imagination by looking for an explanation.

... Academic economics in France has rarely been more creative — he cites his colleague Jean Tirole, winner of the Nobel prize in 2014, and Thomas Piketty, author of Capital as examples of economists who ‘start from the view that society has failed to create an efficient allocation of resources, and then find out why that is.’ But this mindset is still too rare in teaching, he says, and too few economists are open to new ideas in disciplines such as psychology and sociology.

‘We have a problem in France that the public does not perceive economics as a science, but as an ideology. There are still too many important questions that economists simply do not ask, and the catastrophe of the last 50 years is that we have taught the subject as if all these exciting new ideas do not exist,’ he explains.

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