

UCL Economics Walk: A place-based method of teaching economics

Dr Ramin Nassehi

r.nassehi@ucl.ac.uk

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Abstract

UCL Economics Walk is a walking tour of Bloomsbury London, where the tour leader (i.e. lecturer) takes the audience (students or members of public) through different locations (statues, buildings and shops) that have an economic story to tell. The project's aim is to explain complex economic ideas in an accessible way to students and/or members of the public and encourage critical discussion on those ideas. I have offered this tour in person and virtually for sixteen times so far, with more than 200 total attendees. In terms of pedagogy, this tour follows a dialogical approach in a sense that the tour leader starts a conversation about each location with, and among, the audience rather than monotonically transfer facts to the participants. By using certain locations as case studies of economics, this tour offers a contextually rich understanding of the link between economic theories and real-world examples. Also, by going outside the conventional classroom and into the streets (Face-to-Face version), the tour automatically creates a more equal footing between the guide/speaker and the participants, hence opening the room for peer conversation and debate. Most importantly, this tour takes a place-based approach to teaching economics that can be easily adapted to different campuses, towns or cities.

Keywords: Public engagement, Democratising economics, Dialogic approach, Bloomsbury.

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Introduction

There is now a consensus that, as a discipline, economics need to get better at communicating with the public. Banerjee and Duflo (2019), famously highlight that the public put so little trust in expert opinions by economists. They stress that “the professional consensus of economists (when it exists) is often systematically different from the views of ordinary citizens”. One remedy for this “trust deficit” is for economist to design and run exciting public engagement projects to communicate expert opinions. This paper talks about one such innovation project: UCL Economics Walk. This is a walking tour of Bloomsbury London, where the tour leader (i.e. lecturer) takes the audience (students or members of public) through different locations (statues, buildings and shops) that have an economic story to tell. The project’s aim is to explain complex economic ideas in an accessible way to students and/or members of the public and encourage critical discussion on those ideas. During this tour we visit various locations or objects like the house of John Maynard Keynes, the Beverage Hall in Senate Building and Jeremy Bentham’s auto to hold a discussion about various contemporary economic problems and theories like fiscal stimulus, welfare state, growing income inequality and financial instability. So far, this tour has been offered in person and virtually for sixteen times, to more than 200 total attendees. In terms of pedagogy, this tour offers three novelties.

Firstly, it offers a location-based method of teaching economics. Each visiting location is used as a case study or an “associating object” for an economic idea. For instance, when visiting the house of Vladimir Lenin in Bloomsbury the tour discusses the contemporary problem of growing income inequality, specifically the declining share of labour income and the rise of top 1%. In this way, each location is associated with a particular economic problem and a set of relevant economic theories. This weaving of ideas to places, makes economic theories more intuitive and easier to remember for the audience. As mentioned, almost all locations visited in the tour has a historical significance, like house of John Maynard Keynes or Jeremy Bentham’s auto icon. But this is *not* a historical walking tour in essence, this place-based method of teaching economics can be applied more widely to any location or an object that has an economic story to tell like a Tesco shop or a town bridge.

Secondly, the tour adopts a dialogic approach in economics teaching. The communication in conventional economics lectures (or even most walking tours) is mostly one-way: the lecturer aims to convey an economic idea to passive listeners by giving them a lot of interesting facts or engaging real world examples. But in the dialogic approach, lecturer (tour guide) initiates a discussion about a real-world economic problem with the aim of enabling participants to “discover” economic knowledge or arrive at economic theories, let’s say the concept of comparative advantage, by themselves. The assumption here is that most economics is “common sense” where people use in their everyday life without being aware of it. The two-way talk in the tour aims to make the tacit knowledge of participants explicit and formal for them. It is important to stress that the process of learning is mutual in this dialogue; lecturers also learn about the *limits* of economic knowledge and its applications to the real-world problems. They constantly refine or polish their knowledge through a dialogue.

Finally, the tour innovatively integrates various digital technologies in economic storytelling. For instance, the face-to-face version of the tour uses QRL codes (in the printed handout) for some visiting locations to direct the audience to relevant online resources like short videos, articles or documentaries on the topic under the discussion. This aims to create a synergy between the walking tour and the vast popular online economics resources and motivates the audience to explore further beyond when the face-to-face tour comes to an end. Of course, the virtual version of the tour, which is offered on Zoom, uses a wider range of digital technologies to create a sense of location, group journey and collective discussion in the streets of London. This tour innovatively integrates various multimedia tools such as a customised Google Map, PowerPoint slides, online polling, Zoom chat, popular songs and short snippet from historical movies to take the audience in an exciting interactive intellectual journey. This innovative combination of digital technologies can be used in a wide range of remote education projects.

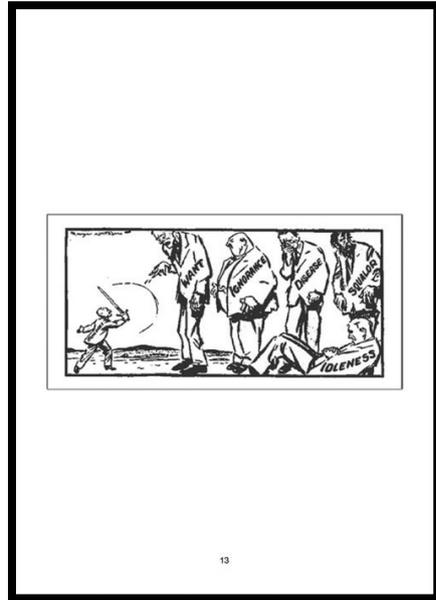
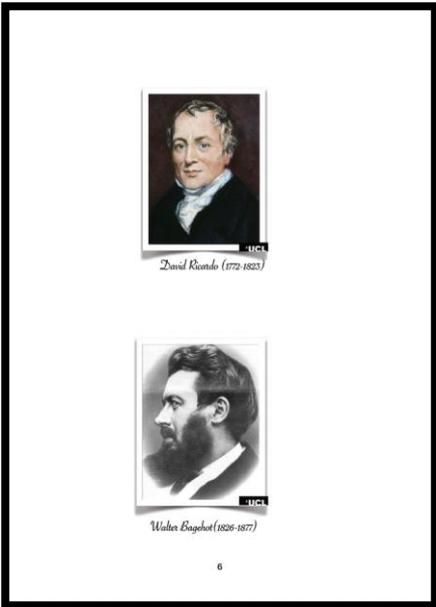
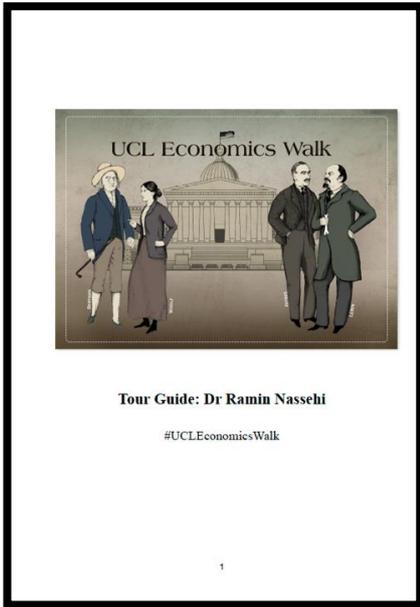
The remainder of this paper is organised as follow. Section one offers a through description of the tour, both face-to-face and the virtual version of it. Section two lays out the aims that this project tries to achieve and section three discusses the pedagogical innovation of it more in-depth. Finally, the conclusion brings the three central themes of this paper- that are location-based method teaching, dialogic approach, and digital technologies- together and discusses the adaptability of this project to other contexts.

1. Description of the tour:

UCL Economics Walk has been offered into two formats: Face-to-Face and Virtual. So far, the face-to-face version of the tour has run for 18 times and more than 200 people have attended it. The virtual version of it has been delivered for two times with more about 50 attendees overall.

1.1 Face to face version:

The target audience of the face-to-face tour has been UCL students and their parents; UCL Staff; UCL students from other London universities; international exchange students; and member of public, especially residence of Bloomsbury and Camden. This version of the tour has been offered in different occasions such as Departmental Open days, induction weeks for the UCL students, the UCL “Festival of Culture” and the UCL “It’s all Academic Festival”. It was also delivered as part of the Royal Economic Society’s outreach project “Discover Economics” at UCL. I have also run this tour to a group of visiting UG economics students from Oklahoma University. The tour lasts about 90 minutes, during which we visit seven locations in the Bloomsbury area. The average size of each tour is about 15, and the audience are asked to fill out an evaluation form at the end of the tour. A paper handout is given to each attendee. This handout includes information about each character or location that is covered in the tour; historical pictures and cartoons; recommended books related to the topics that are discussed and QRL codes to complementary articles or YouTube videos. Here are selected pages of the handout:



All the locations that we visit have an overall thread: the history of economic and political thinking from the early 19th century till today. Each location we visit links to an economic or political idea that idea is categorised under these three schools of thought: (a) economic and political liberalism, (b) socialism and (c) nationalism and Fascism. This categorisation creates an analytical thread that connects all the locations together and helps the process of retrieving among the audience. Most importantly, the tour discussed the relevance of each idea for today.

For instance, when visiting UCL Economic Department's building, which has a historical connection with David Ricardo, we discussed the idea of comparative advantage and its relevance for today. A QRL code is provided for some locations to direct the audience to relevant videos or articles they can explore after the tour. As will be discussed later in detail, the tour leader adopts a very interactive approach by initiating a discussion, posing a question, or doing a role play when visiting each location, following the dialogic method of teaching. The below table lays out the locations that are covered by the face-to face tour; the characters and concepts that are discussed under each location; and the way in which those ideas are related today's economic or political debates.

Location 1: University's main entrance gate

- Laying out the analytical thread connecting all the locations that we are going to visit: the history of economic thinking from the early 19th century till today.
- Activity: Distribution of handouts. Asking the audience to get into groups of three (for future discussions).

Location 2: Jeremy Bentham's Auto-Icon

- Historical theme: rise of political liberalism at the early 19th century
- Characters that are discussed: Jeremy Bentham
- Concepts that are covered: Utilitarianism
- Relevance for today's economics: utility functions, normative economics, public policy, happiness studies.
- Relevance for today's policy problems: Growing income inequality.
- Discussion with the audience: What would Jeremy Bentham say about the extensive use of CCTVs all around the world? (in reference to his idea of panopticon).
- Digital technology: A QRL code is provided to a YouTube video on the rivalry between UCL and King's College (to be explored further after the tour).

Location 3: UCL Department of Economics, Drayton House

- Historical theme: rise of economic liberalism at the early 19th century.
- Characters that are discussed: David Ricardo and Clara Collet (among the first female economics students in the UK).
- Concepts that are covered: Comparative Advantage, Gender equality.
- Activity: A role play game among the audience reading the concept of comparative advantage.
- Relevance for today's economics: Introduction to international trade, labour economics (gender equality).
- Relevance for today's policy problems: Trade wars between the US and China; Gender equality in economics.
- Discussion with the audience: What would David Ricardo say about the US-China trade war if he was around today? What would Clara Collet say about "women in economics" if she was around today?

Location 4: Pearson Building (now de-named)

- Historical theme: rise of "Scientific Racism" and Social Darwinism at the mid 19th century.
- Characters that are discussed: Thomas Malthus, Francis Galton, Karl Pearson
- Concepts that are covered: Eugenics, regression to mean, wisdom of crowd
- Relevance for today's economics: Applied statistics, econometrics
- Relevance for today's policy problems: Black Lives Matter and the issues surrounding the memorialisation.
- Digital technology: A QRL code is provided to a BBC Documentary Eugenics to explore further after the tour.

Location 5: Vladimir Lenin's House in Bloomsbury

- Historical theme: climax of socialism at the late 19th century and the early 20th century.
- Characters that are discussed: Karl Marx, Beatrice Webb, Clara Collet and Vladimir Lenin.

- Concepts that are covered: Growing income share of capital. Core and periphery in international trade. Piketty's book on "Capital in the 21st century".
- Relevance for today's economics: welfare economics, labour economics.
- Relevance for today's policy problems: Growing income and wealth inequality within countries. Global income inequality.
- Discussion with the audience: What would Vladimir Lenin say about US-China trade war if he was around today?

Location 6: Keynes' house in Bloomsbury

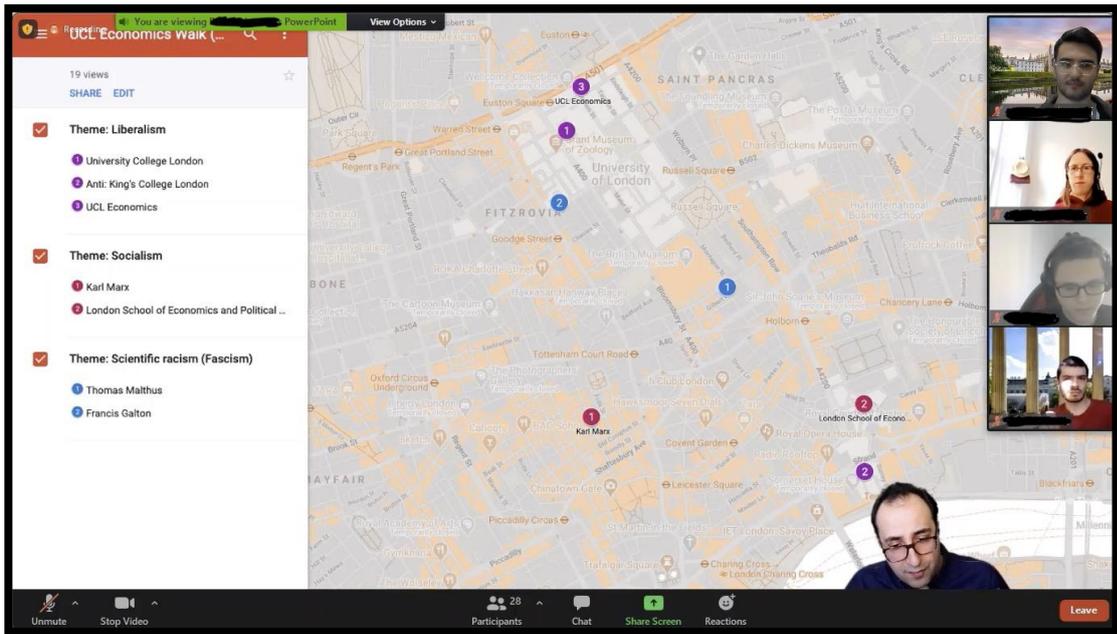
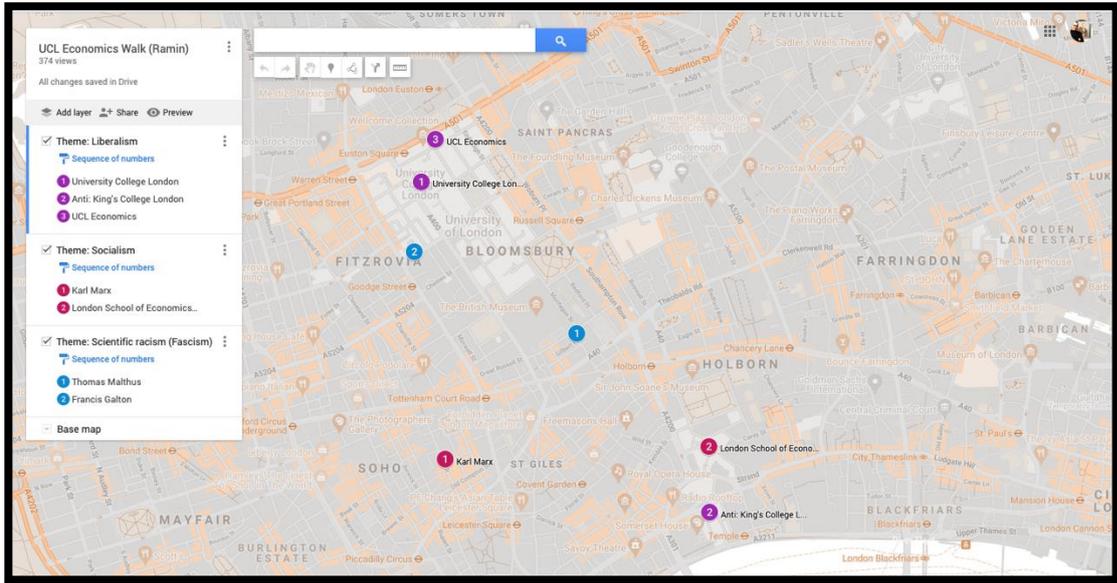
- Historical theme: the Great Depression of the 1930s and the rise of Fascism
- Characters that are discussed: John Maynard Keynes and New Keynesians (Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz).
- Concepts that are covered: Paradox of Thrift, Keynesian fiscal stimulus
- Relevance for today's economics: macroeconomics.
- Relevance for today's policy problems: the financial crisis of 2008 and austerity in the UK, COVID fiscal package in the UK.
- Discussion with the audience: What would Keynes say about COVID fiscal package in the UK if he was around today?

Location 7: Senate House

- Historical theme: WW II, fight against fascism, rise of the welfare state after the War
- Characters that are discussed: William Beveridge
- Concepts that are covered: Income distribution, Welfare State
- Relevance for today's economics: welfare economics and public policy making. Labour economics.
- Relevance for today's policy problems: Aging population in the UK and the growing income inequality.
- Discussion with the audience: What would a new welfare state look like in the UK?

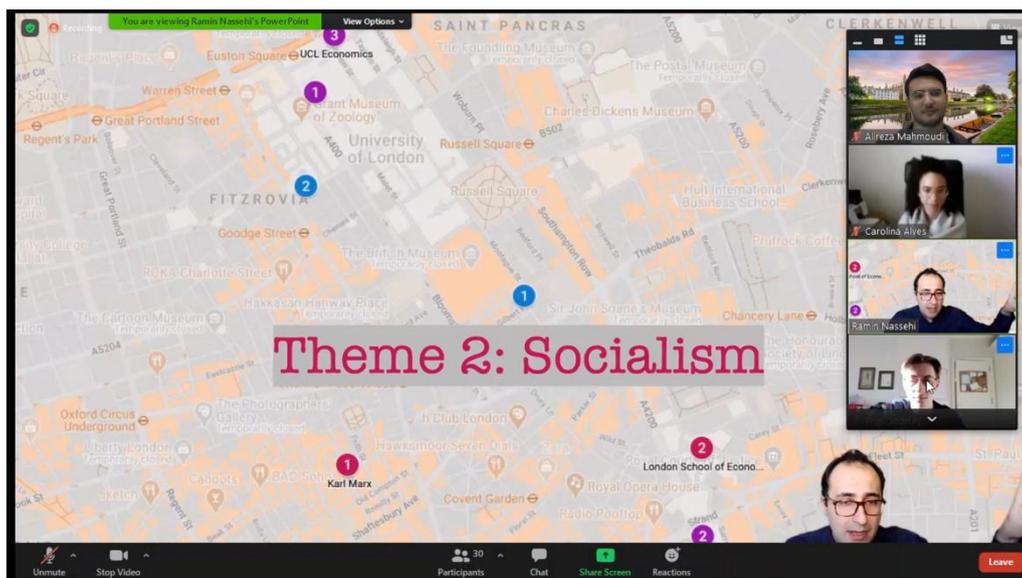
1.2 The virtual version of the tour:

The outbreak of COVID pushed this project to take a bold and innovative turn by going fully virtual. The main delivery platform for the virtual tour has been Zoom. The main challenge of course is to create a sense of location around the streets of London virtually. This is done via creation of a customised [Google map](#) with the seven locations marked on it. Again, each location is associated with a thinker or idea and like the face-to-face version, those ideas are categorised into three schools of thought liberalism (marked by purple slots on the map), socialism (red spots) and scientific racism/Fascism (blue spots).



The most important feature of the Zoom is that it allows the speaker to project the Google map as a virtual background as shown above. The use of greenscreen by the speaker can make this projection smoother. And more excitingly, this Zoom feature enables the speaker to more around the map as shown in the below clip. As highlighted by one of the attendees, this feature allowed the tour guide to “fly around” the streets of London and create a sense of location virtually (Watch this [video](#)). The same point is also echoed by another attendee:

“I found amazingly funny and useful how the presenter moved around his video stream to focus on certain part of the slides. Completely surprised of how effective it was”.



The upside of the virtual tour is that it enables the tour guide to play videos or music that is related to the idea under the discussion. For instance, when discussing the idea of Thomas Malthus, a short dialogue of “Christmas Carol” is played in which Scrooge refers to poverty being caused by “surplus population”, refereeing to Malthus’ idea. This use of multimedia creates a very engaging environment for the audience as highlighted by an attendee:

“I loved how interactive the tour was (though it was virtual)- the use of music, lots of pictures and videos definitely made it more enjoyable and engaging”.

Just like the face-to-face version, the virtual tour is highly interactive. For instance, when discussing the Ricardian comparative advantage theory, I ask the audience to do a role play. They should put themselves in the shareholders of Apple company and decide if they want to stop outsourcing the assembly of iPhones to China and instead investing in robots that can assemble iPhones cheaper in California. They are asked to cast their vote via an online poll.

After exhibiting the poll results on the screen, I ask the audience from each decision camp to explain the rationale behind their decision. The idea here is that through a dialogue we get an intuitive sense for the idea of comparative advantage (maybe it would be better for the Apple company to keep outsourcing the assembly of iPhones to China and invest their money in something than generates more profit than cost cutting in the assembly stage). The most important upside of the virtual tour was it enabled us to widen our reach to students and academics from all around the world and make the project more international and inclusive. Overall, through the use of Google Map, greenscreen, video clips and online polling, the virtual tour aims to create an interactive intellectual journey across different locations in London. This can be viewed as an innovative combination of online technology, location-based method of teaching economics and dialogic method.

2. The project's aims

As a public engagement project, this tour aspires towards several goals. Firstly, it seeks to demystify and democratise economics. It is acknowledged that economists have a problem of communicating their ideas to the general public. As highlighted by Banerjee and Duflo (2019), the public trusts economists less than weather forecasters and that is partly due to the poor communication skills of the former and lack of investment in public engagement projects. This tour aims to teach a set of core economics ideas such as comparative advantage, Keynesian stimulus, reasons behind declining share of labour income etc to non-experts through an interactive discussion, emphasising that economics knowledge is no more than everyday common sense that we all use (Abdelrahman, 2019).

The second aim of the tour, especially the face to face version of it, is community building both within the UCL students and also the wider Bloomsbury and Camden area. By walking around the Bloomsbury streets and holding a discussion about the economic stories behind those streets, this tour creates socialisation experience for UCL students and staff, students from other London universities or schools; and the residence of the Bloomsbury and Camden. Relatedly, the other aim of the tour is to decolonise the classroom. By going outside the conventional classroom into the streets, the tour (F2F version) automatically creates a more equal footing between the guide (lecturer) and the participants, opening the room for a more inclusive conversation and debate. In other words, the very format of the face-to-face tour challenges the traditional lecturer-participants power relation.

The final goal of the tour is focused narrowly on the history of economic thought. The goal here is to familiarise economics students with a brief history of their discipline and more importantly highlights the interdisciplinary nature of economics. The tour highlights the interconnected intellectual life of economists, natural scientists, statisticians, philosophers and literary figures who lived in the Boomsbury area (Goldsmith & Casey, 2011). For instance, the tour talks about the way in which ideas of Thomas Malthus (economist) influenced Charles Darwin and how theory of evolution in turn influenced the ideas of Karl Marx and 19th century Fabian socialists. Talking about different schools of thought, the tour also highlights the

diversity methodological approaches *within* economics, and in doing so, emphasis the pluralistic nature of economics, as advocated by Garnett (2009) and Mearman (2007). The tour also embeds any economic idea that it discusses in the wider social and political environment from which it emerged in the first place. For instance, the tour connects the ideas of economists like David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus and John Maynard Keynes to the wider social and political environment of their time and by doing this, invite participants, especially economists, to think more critically about the importance of wider social and political context in which economics departments operate on the scope of their economics research. Hence, encouraging a critical self-reflection among economists who attend the tour, in line with Coyle's (2011) suggestion.

In the end, it needs to be mentioned that this project was highly inspired by [Economics Walks](#) excitingly put together by Professor Ian Preston. Using a customised Google Map, this project highlights more than 200 locations in London that are associated with famous economists and lay out various walking paths that connect these locations together.

3. The tour's pedagogy

One of the main pedagogical innovations of this tour is location-based teaching of economics. In this method, each location serves as a case study of a real-world problem in economics, which is analysed through the application of economic theory. As mentioned, each location in the tour is associated with a thinker of an idea, but at a much deeper level, each idea is connected to the analysis of a contemporary economic problem. For instance, Keynes' house in the Bloomsbury is linked to the case study of 2008 financial crisis and the policy responses to COVID. Or Lenin's house is associated with the declining share of labour income in rich countries since 1980. So, the attendees would connect each location in the tour to an economic idea and a contemporary real-world problem.

It is important to stress that the location-based method of teaching can go beyond the discussion of historical buildings, monuments or history of economic thought. This method can be applied for locations that have no historical significance whatsoever but relate to a real-world economic problem that can be analysed through the application of economic theory. For instance, a lecturer can design a tour around the real-world case studies of price discrimination by visiting the nearby cinema, Starbucks or supermarket on campus. Such a tour would make a strong connection between principles of microeconomics and everyday locations that students visit and helps them better understand and remember those principles. The essential element of the location-based method is that all the locations visited in the tour should be connected with an analytical thread; in this case, the principles of microeconomics.

Broadly speaking, location-based method of teaching economics should be seen as a subset of case study method. Case studies (a) encourage discussion and therefore collaborative learning among students, (b) stimulate deep learning by encouraging students to apply their knowledge to analyse a real world problem (b) stimulate learning-by-doing through in-depth analysis of a real world problems, (c) give a chance to students to act like an economist in a "low-stake" environment, (d) provide a sense of agency to students as active learners as opposed to passive absorbers of knowledge, (e) encourage a dialogue between the students and the lecturer (tour guide) and in so doing, empower the students as an equal partner in knowledge discovery (Cornway, 2011). As for effectiveness of discussion and debate for learning, the research shows

that students retrieve 80% of what they *say and do*, compared to 10% of what they *read* (ibid). The location-based method makes the remembering and application of theories even easier and stronger for students as it turns everyday locations that they visit on campus to a case study of economics.

The other pedagogical innovation of this project is incorporation of the dialogic method in teaching economics. There is much less debate or discussion in teaching economics, compared to history, philosophy or sociology lectures (Hansen & Salemi, 2011). Students are often viewed as passive absorbers of knowledge in economics classrooms. One could argue that this lack of “two-way” talk between lecturers and students stems from the more “technical” nature of the subject. However, many scholars argue that despite its highly technical nature, economics teaching can greatly benefit from the dialogic approach to education (Wolfe, & Alexander, 2008; Skidmore, 2006; Reznitskaya, et al, 2009), specifically from stimulating debate around real world case studies (Elzinga, 2011; Buckles, Hoyt & Imazeki, 2011).

In the dialogic approach, lecturer (tour guide) initiates a discussion about a real-world economic problem with the aim of enabling participants to “discover” economic knowledge by themselves. The assumption here is that most economics is “common sense” where people use in their everyday life without being aware of it. The two-way talk in the tour aims to make the tacit knowledge of participants explicit and formal for them. It is important to stress that the process of learning is mutual in this dialogue; lecturers also learn about the *limits* of economic knowledge and its applications to the real-world problems. They constantly refine or polish their knowledge through a dialogue. This mutual learning makes the dialogic approach different from the classic Aristotelian discussion between lecturer and students. An example from the tour can further clarify the pedagogy of the dialogic approach.

As mentioned above, in stop 3 of the tour I talk about David Ricardo and the concept of comparative advantage. Economists often teach the concept of “comparative advantage” in international trade in a very abstract way by using unreal examples such as “two hypothetical countries selling two goods to each other”! Going against this conventional approach, I conduct a role play among participants to talk about this concept. I ask them to imagine that they are

shareholders of Apple company in California and, at the moment, they outsource the assembly of iPhones to China. An investment project worth of \$2 billion is proposed to them and that is building of robots in California that can assemble iPhones cheaper than Chinese workers. Now as shareholders of Apple they have two options to vote for: (a) invest in this project and reduce the cost of assembly by doing it “in house” in California or (b) invest the money (\$2billion) in another project and continue outsourcing the assembly of iPhones to China. Participants are asked to get into small groups and make their decision and then discuss this decision with the lecturer and other participants. Of course, some participants start to indirectly talk about the “opportunity cost” of investing in the robots, which is at the heart of Ricardian comparative advantage theory, and vote for option (b), reasoning that the money could be invested at a production stage that would generate most profit for Apple company such as marketing on software development. On the other hand, some participants start to talk about the limits of this reasoning and mention that building of assembler robots in California can have technological spillovers to other parts of Apple operations. Through this two-way dialogue, participants usually “discover” the common sense behind the idea of comparative advantage. Also at the other end, this dialogue has helped me refine my knowledge about the limits of applying Ricardian comparative advantage theory to real-world problems.

Conclusion

UCL Economics Walk tries to create a pedagogical synergy by innovatively bringing together these three tools: placed-based method of teaching, dialogic method, and digital technology. On the first tool, the tour uses certain locations as case studies to talk about economics. The locations in this tour happen to have historical significance. But this is not the main essence of the tour: a Tesco store or a town bridge can be used for economic story telling as much as the house of John Maynard Keynes in Bloomsbury. So, the method of location-based teaching can be adapted to any context. The main value of this method is that it discusses economic theories through tangible case studies (statues, historical buildings, stores, bridges etc). Also, the very act of getting out of the lecture room and going into the street changes the lecturer-audience power dynamic and offers a new medium for diversifying and decolonising economics teaching.

Secondly, following the dialogic approach, the tour leader aims to start a conversation about economic theories and facts with the audience when visiting the locations, instead of unilaterally transmitting information and facts. To spur conversation, the tour uses various interactive tools such as role plays, groups games and peer discussions. The assumption here is that most economics is “common sense” where people use in their everyday life without being aware of it. The conversations in the tour aims to make the tacit knowledge of participants explicit and formal for them. It is important to stress that the process of learning is mutual in this dialogue; tour leader also learns about the *limits* of economic knowledge and its applications to the real-world problems.

Finally, the tour uses digital technology in various innovative ways. In the Face-to-Face version, QRL codes are provided for some locations via the printed handout. These codes direct the audience to various articles or videos that complement the discussion in the tour. So, the walk tries to leave the audience with a sense of curiosity to further explore the related online material after the tour. Similarly, the virtual version of the tour innovatively brings together various technologies such as Google Map, Green Screen, video clips, music, online polling,

online chat on the Zoom platform to create the sense of a collective interactive journey through the streets of London. This technological combination can be potentially adapted to other educational contexts.

Overall, this tour uses the trio of location-based method, dialogic approach and digital technology to create an exciting and low-stake environment for public engagement with economics. This project can be potentially adapted to any campus, town or city.

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