

DEBATE “PRO ET CONTRA” AS AN EFFICIENT METHOD FOR BUILDING PLURAL COMMUNITIES OF TEACHERS AND PhD STUDENTS IN A MUTUAL COOPERATIVE LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract

Economic theory lost the capacity of an anthropocentric view of the world due to the domination of the neoclassical paradigm and the lack of pluralism within economics and beyond it. Debate is an appropriate educational method for introducing more pluralism into the education of today’s PhD’s students in order to foster their understanding of today’s emerging problems. This paper presents debate “pro et contra” as a highly structured rhetorical event and disciplined conversation about topics of interest with opposing advocates alternating before a decision-making body. The qualitative analysis shows that debate increases students' capacity for critical, controversial and original thinking and that is a highly efficient method for promoting a more cooperative learning process. In this way, knowledge is necessarily dispersed and not given completely to anyone since it is embedded not only in a traditional one-way transfer of knowledge from teachers to students but also in debates, teamwork and class conversations.

Keywords: debate, neoclassical paradigm, pluralism, holism, cooperation.

1. Introduction

The education of today’s economists is based on the strict methodological rules which foster domination of the neoclassical paradigm in economics and in the broad framework of social sciences. The divisions between and within the scientific community have become synonymous for partial analyses and mutual exclusion of ideas. Several authors therefore have pointed out the importance of pluralism and holism in economics (Mearman, 2007; King, 2004; Freeman, 2010; Söderbaum, 2008).

I believe that due to partial analyses, economic theory has lost its capacity of an anthropocentric view of the world. Thus, the pledge for a change in the education system of economists has been addressed on one hand by scholars (Barone, 1991; Goodvin, 2008) and on the other hand by students (e.g. the Post-autistic economics movement in France). Recent developments have also influenced our need to change the education system of economists. The global financial crisis (Big Recession) that erupted in 2007 has significantly

intensified the controversy about the status of mainstream economics because of its failure to adequately grasp it (Blinder, 2010; Kowalski & Shachmurove, 2011; Colander, Foellmer, & Haas, 2009; Hodgson, 2011). The global financial and economic crisis raises the question of how this should be reflected in the education system of today's economists and their curriculum.

I strongly believe that debate "pro et contra" can help in changing the education system of today's economists. Debate is an equitably structured rhetorical event in the class about some topic of interest, with opposing advocates alternating before a decision-making body. I argue that debate can be used for promoting more pluralism and holism in the education of today's economists in order to better resolve today's problems. In my opinion, debate also enables students to be more engaged in the education process since the roles of the students and teachers change. The debate "pro et contra" enables us to build a new social framework in terms of how new ideas and arguments are produced through more pluralistic concepts and a more interactive process of social learning.

The main purpose of the article is threefold: (1) To argue that the neoclassical school has consolidated its monopoly position within economics and in the broad framework of social sciences; (2) To show that the lack of pluralism and holism in the education system of today's economists can be overcome through the debate "pro et contra"; and (3) To conduct a qualitative study in order to present debate as an efficient educational method for promoting a mutual cooperative learning process between students and teacher.

The article is structured as follows. In section two and three the dominance of the neoclassical school is presented. In section four, I point out the lack and importance of pluralism and holism in the (economic) scientific community. In section five, the debate "pro et contra" as a disciplined conversation is presented along with its protocol. In section six, a qualitative study about perceptions of debate as an educational method is presented in order to show how debate can be an efficient method for promoting more pluralism and holism within economics and for encouraging a cooperative learning process. The last section concludes by summarizing the main findings.

2. Neoclassical Paradigm

The theories that sprang up before the birth of modern science were related to everyday experience, and, as such, they relied heavily on the influence, intellectual breadth and perspicacity of the individual. Positivism broke the link between science and everyday experience to provide a solid foundation for those sciences that were willing to adopt the strict rules of the scientific method (Ule, 1992). The gist of the Popperian approach is to freely propose hypotheses that can withstand the harshest possible attempts of rejection (Popper, 1998). Positivism, with its rigorous methodology, stresses objectification of knowledge which is equated with classical physics (Blaug, 1992; Ule, 1992).

Economics has developed a relatively simple set of methodological apparatus, which results in a high level of unity among economists. The domination of the neoclassical paradigm has been often addressed in the economic community (Johnson, 1983) as an ideal for the majority of contemporary economists. Economics, with extensive use of mathematical formalism and statistical techniques, adopted the methodology of natural sciences. Worswick (1972) and Pheby (1988) go so far as to submit that economics has become indiscernible from mathematics, a discipline that represents the apex of scientific purity. Neoclassical methodology relies on deductive reasoning, bold testing of hypotheses, and checking the hypotheses against empirical facts. The starting point is the rationality from which equilibrium as the solution of agent maximization problems is inferred through deductive logic. It seems that mathematics has become the “lingua franca” of modern economics. The unity of textbooks and academic programs clearly illustrates the high level of domination of the neoclassical school.

A methodological approach that is based exclusively on mathematical tools and statistical methods is no longer adequate for today's circumstances. Many authors assert that neoclassical economics has relatively weak forecasting power since it has failed most conspicuously when attempting to provide practical advice. Goodvin (2008) and Freeman (2010) argue that the neoclassical school has neglected the consistency between theory and reality. Mayhew (2008) points out that orthodox economics is inadequate for providing an account of the lives of the vast majority of people. The global financial crisis (Big Recession) that erupted in 2007 has significantly intensified the controversy about the status of mainstream economics (Blinder, 2010; Kowalski & Shachmurove, 2011).

I believe that economic theory has lost the capacity of an anthropocentric view of the world because of its lack of willingness to communicate within its own and with other scientific disciplines. As a result, it falls short in its attempts to respond to contemporary challenges.

3. Paradigms and Divisions in the Scientific Community

Emancipation of scientific disciplines and institutionalization of science within particular scientific communities leads to divisions that hinder efficient communication between them. Attention of different scientific communities is focused on different problems, and the use of different scientific languages impedes mutual communication. As a rule, the results are verified and interpreted within individual scientific communities (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hassard, 1993; Calas & Smircich, 1999). Divisions are becoming synonymous to partial analyses, localized worlds, and the mutual exclusion of ideas. The level of communication is as a rule higher within a particular scientific community than between different scientific communities.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) point out that mutual cooperation within and between different disciplines is anything but simple because of the mutual exclusiveness of particular paradigms. In this paper, “paradigm” is understood

as a conceptual and methodological core that is common to all members of a particular scientific community or school members (Ule, 1992; Sušjan, 1993). Members of a particular paradigm share a system of education and the same view of solving relevant problems. Kuhn (1998) maintains that paradigms are incompatible and incommensurable because they rely on different assumptions; thus, they are in a state of "paradigmatic war" (Reed, 1994).

Ward (1972) and Johnson (1983) stress that economics is "ruled today" by the neoclassical paradigm. Modern neoclassical theory centers its attention on the workings of the market, prices, and equilibria, which compels heavy use of mathematics and objectification of knowledge. Compared to other theories, economic theory has developed a fairly straightforward and closed system based on rationality, equilibrium, and methodological individualism. The starting point is the concept of rationality which becomes the standard tool of analysis. The neoclassical school "exerts" a high level of control over the scientists through their education and financing, and through the methodology they employ. On the one hand, use of such scientific language within the neoclassical paradigm reduces the diversity of methodological approaches and opinions within economic theory; on the other hand, it impedes better cooperation with other scientific communities. Rigorous methodology renders it adverse to both internal pluralism within its own scientific community, and external pluralism in the sense of more intense cooperation with other scientific disciplines.

Neoclassical economics often simply ignored any critique pointing out its unwillingness to work more profoundly with other scientific disciplines, and rather than acknowledging its weakness, developed a strong conviction of its own power. Desire for universal dominance and validity led to ever stronger "intrusions" of economics into other fields. The economic imperialism of the neoclassical school is manifest both internally within the economic community and externally in its drive to conquer other fields. Adopting principle of competitive advantage, (neoclassical) economics developed its competitive advantages relative to other social sciences for the following three reasons.

First, objectification of knowledge at the epistemic level allows a systematic and transparent organization of theoretical knowledge; thus, the "system of rationality" is extended to the very theory of science as well (Kovač, 2001). Rational science is thus connected with the economic models of rational behaviour of economic agents. Secondly, divisions and institutionalization of science within particular scientific communities created the circumstances for the venture of economics into other, traditionally non-economic fields. Neoclassical economic theory argues that economic rationality can be applied to all fields of human life where scarce resources and problems of choice appear (Becker, 1976). Becker (1976, 1993) advocates the application of economic rationality to family, human capital and crime. Stigler (1984) lists four fields of economic imperialism: economic analysis of politics, economic analysis of sociological structures, economic history and economic analysis of law. And thirdly, the neoclassical paradigm succeeded in monopolizing the market for science in terms of publication and in their influence on the

adoption of key decisions in the society. The unity of introductory economics textbooks illustrates the high level of homogeneity of the neoclassical school (McKinley & Mone, 1999).

Economics has the leading role among social sciences and thus has been dubbed the "queen" of social sciences. Use of rigorous language expresses the desire for universal application of neoclassical approaches even in traditionally non-economic fields. With such "uninvited" advances into other scientific fields, economics clearly and unambiguously presents its lack of interest in more interdisciplinary approaches that would allow deeper understanding of today's problems. With its scientific language, methodological apparatus, and uncompromising forays into other fields, neoclassical economics is effectively destroying the foundations for more fruitful cooperation with other scientific disciplines.

4. Postmodern Holism and Pluralism

Post-modernism encourages deeper cooperation between and within scientific communities since the key goal of post-modernism is to move beyond paradigmatic approaches (Johnson, 1983; Hassard, 1993). In the post-modern open society, we encounter scientific languages of various scientific communities and schools (Hassard, 1993; Cooper & Burrell, 1988). A higher level of mutual communication, tolerance, cooperation, and competition between and within different scientific communities should be developed. Only such an interactive process will allow understanding and resolving emerging problems and puzzles (Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Pheby, 1988).

No approach would be either privileged or *à priori* eliminated (Feyerabend, 1999). For example, we do not know whether the present crisis is best understood by orthodox (neoclassical) or heterodox economic theories (e.g. institutional, Marxian). It is simply impossible to establish since there is no absolute set of appraisal criteria by which to judge the theories (incommensurability problem). Thus, an economist could use approaches that would, in his own belief, be best suited for a particular problem and situation. This would enable a more democratic debate within the economic discipline and at the same time contribute significantly to better understanding of the real economy since decision-makers would have a range of different policy scenarios at their disposal.

Thus, the key goal in the education of today's economists should be to move beyond the paradigmatic approaches in economics and to promote deeper cooperation between different scientific disciplines. I also strongly believe that only such an education process will foster understanding of the emerging problems and contribute meaningfully to their solutions. I believe that the urge for a deeper understanding of today's problems demands an education approach which would leave generations of future scholars more familiar with different schools of thought within economics and with other scientific disciplines. The teaching of economics should include more readings of economic classics as well as relevant topics from other scientific disciplines.

A more pluralistic and holistic education would undoubtedly increase the students' capacity for critical, controversial and original thinking in order to avoid the mistakes of their teachers. The aim of the next section is to show whether debate as an educational method is suitable for helping us to achieve these goals.

5. Debate “Pro et Contra”

McCloskey (1983, 1994) argues that economists' genuine “workaday” rhetoric, the way they argue inside their heads or their seminar rooms, largely diverges from the “official” rhetoric based on statistical tests and regressions. Thus, economists should focus more on their workaday rhetoric, because they will then better know why they agree or disagree by using metaphors, the relevance of historical precedents, the persuasiveness of introspections, the power of authority, the charm of speaker and the claims of morality (McCloskey, 1994). Rhetoric is a disciplined conversation and by "rhetoric" it does not mean a verbal shell game, as in "empty rhetoric" (McCloskey, 1994).

The rhetoric approach has roots in the classical rhetoric of the ancient Greeks. The contemporary approach is similar in forms and methods of argument, but it now applies also to the practice of science. The Greeks were focused mainly on speech-making; however, contemporary approaches are focused on dialogues between scientists (or students in the class). The rhetoric approach is thus a social framework in terms of how it produces and disseminates new ideas and arguments (Boumans & Davis, 2010). On the other hand, it is also a framework in which we are persuaded within the framework of these structures and exposed to direct critique and persuasion of others. Snider and Schnurer (2006) argue that economic issues are well suited for such a debate.

I believe that the ability to teach students through a more interactive debate process to develop new thoughts and to explore new theoretical ideas within and beyond economics in order to better understand and solve real world problems should be the key goals in education of every teacher. I firmly believe that debate “pro et contra” as an educational method can help us tremendously in achieving these goals. Debate is an equitably structured rhetorical event in the class about some topic of interest, with opposing advocates alternating before a decision-making body. A debate is structured, with established communication periods with a beginning and an end (Snider, Schnurer, 2006).

Among a wide variety of debate formats, I decided to employ the format debate “in vivo” by two opposite teams plus a public assembly. Each two weeks I appointed two teams and gave reading assignments (posted on the course website) for the following class. The teams were required to prepare a public discussion (debate) on the selected topic to be presented in the classroom. In the debate they sought to persuade their opponents and the rest of the students in the class. Team A advocated the thesis and Team B took the

opposing side. Both teams presented their arguments during a public debate following a previously defined protocol.

Each team wrote a written report highlighting the key arguments and positions for the debate. The summary form was submitted on the forms downloadable from the course website. This written summary was a prerequisite for taking part in the debate and was the basis for the final assessment of each team's work. Students in each group were obliged to send to me as the professor emailed written reports at least one week before they presented their arguments in the class. I gave them the feedback in order to improve their argumentation in the following class debate.

Teams A and B competed in a public debate ("pro et contra"). Team A advocated the thesis (the government side) and Team B took the opposing side (the opposition). The teams presented their arguments during a public debate following a previously defined protocol. The starting point for the discussion between the two teams was the initial thesis. Based on the materials, each team delivered two key arguments (equal to the number of team members) or points of emphasis. These arguments were devised so as to form a coherent whole and allow the strategic promotion of a central idea.

The class discussion followed the rules of a procedure. The first speaker of the advocating (government) side (Team A) began by presenting the central idea and the team's first argument (5 minutes). Afterwards began the cross examination, during which all members of the opposing side questioned the first speaker of the advocating team (at least 1 question by each student) (5 minutes). The first speaker of the opposing side (Team B) proposed the first argument of the opposing team (Team B) (5 minutes) and afterwards a cross examination by all members of the advocating side followed (at least 1 question by each student) (5 minutes). The last stage was a public forum discussion involving all students and professor (5-7 minutes). The number of rounds was equal to the number of students in one team. If a team member was absent for any reason, the other team members had to find a replacement or present all arguments and cross examinations alone.

Cross examination allowed the two teams to challenge the opponents, request clarification of arguments and refute their claims. Questions were voiced by both members of the team, who took part equivalently in the argumentation. The forum with other students in the class, taking place at the end of the discussion, had a similar form. Each speaker waited for the professor's permission to speak, then stood up to speak. The Professor intervened if the rules were not abided by. The professor merely directed the progress and succession of the discussants, opened and closed the successive rounds, selected the following speaker and summed up the conclusion.

After the end of the debate, the class selected the winning team by raising hands. The winning team received a score bonus. The entire debate competition took up to 60-75 minutes. Average times were indicated, and the moderator could extend the debate when appropriate, or cut it short. Thirty seconds before the expiration of the time available to the speaker, the

timekeeper knocked on the desk to indicate that the exposition should be drawn to a close. The professor assessed the discussion, the participation of other students, and the written report. Each team member taking part in one debate competition might score a maximum of 20 points (percent) towards the final grade.

When preparing the discussion, the teams used, in addition to the core reading material, other resources (the scientific articles, books etc.). Each team member submitted to the professor the written reports/summaries for the debate competition, in writing. The introduction to the debate and the conclusion are considered teamwork, while arguments 1 and 2 etc. are the work of respective individual team members. The report also included a definition of five terms occurring in the article or related to the philosophy of science topic. All other students (not actively engaged in the debate group) had to write their weekly reports in which they argued their positions regarding the thesis (maximum one page). Weekly reports and participation in the class are worth an additional 20% of the final grade, while the written exam is worth 60% of the final grade.

6. Communities of Teachers and PhD Students in a Mutual Learning Process – A Qualitative Study

Debate is an equitably structured rhetorical event in the class about some topic of interest, with opposing advocates alternating before a decision-making body. Debate “pro et contra” was conducted in the PhD class at the Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia in a group of 28 students. There were 5 debate assignments in five weeks.

The qualitative analysis is based on a survey of all students in the class. For a higher level of objectivity, all students were requested to fill out a questionnaire before taking the final exam. The questionnaire is divided into two parts (Evaluation of the course content, Evaluation of instructor). We are mainly interested in the first part of the questionnaire, where a combination of open- and closed-ended questions was used in order to allow students to evaluate in any way they wanted the quality of "pro et contra" debate. Open-ended questions enable students to better express the quality of the classroom debate. Here are presented several quotations from the questionnaire in order to show how students recognized the importance, benefits and usefulness of debate.

I believe that debate encourages students to use different theories in analysing a particular problem. Looking at the same problem from different perspectives improves the student's understanding of the problem. Students pointed out the advantages of a more holistic and pluralistic approach:

- Student No. 1: Debate enables us to broaden our views on the same topic.

- Student No. 2: I liked openness to all streams of economic thought.
- Student No. 3: In the debate we are able to research the same thing from different aspects.

Particular schools and scientific communities too often teach passive acceptance of their ideas. Pluralism within and beyond economics consequently encourages students to think more critically and originally. I strongly believe that debate “pro et contra” helps student to practice critical thinking. Many students noticed this aspect as well by saying:

- Student No. 1: The most positive segment in the debate is that it fosters critical thinking.
- Student No. 2: Student participation and critical thinking are strongly encouraged in debates.
- Student No. 3: In the course students were inspired to participate and think critically.
- Student No. 4: Debate promotes critical thinking even if a student doesn't share the same view.
- Student No. 5: Debate covers very interesting topics and promotes critical thinking.
- Student No. 6: The educational system usually works differently (not much of critical thinking is welcome) so this debate approach was a nice surprise.

Students got constructive feedback in a debate from other students and the professor as well. Several students pointed out strong engagement in a team's work. Thus, professor and students are mutually engaged in the cooperative learning process. Students point out these aspects of social learning by saying:

- Student No. 1: Good interaction between students and professor provoke us to think critically and to be engaged in the joint learning process.
- Student No. 2: The debate approach requires ex-ante preparation however it proves to be useful for the overall learning process.
- Student No. 3: The topics for debates were nicely chosen and professor and student feedbacks were very useful for me.
- Student No. 4: The professor stimulates the student's class participation and helps us greatly in preparing for the debates.
- Student No. 5: Debaters learn not only to compete with others but also to help each other by accomplishing cooperatively the tasks they have been assigned.

It seems that students greatly prefer debate as an educational method over the traditional ex-cathedra teaching in the class. In the questionnaire one of the questions was “Should the debate pro et contra as a teaching method be changed to classical ex-cathedra teaching?”

- Student No. 1: Debate forces you to put your heart, soul and mind into the matter.

- Student No. 2: We have sufficient ex-cathedra teaching in other courses and there is a lot of value added from the debate approach.
- Student No. 3: Even if some students do not want to be in a spotlight, it's useful for them.
- Student No. 4: Debate is highly stimulating, requires people to speak publicly and to be prepared for every class.

The possible disadvantage of such a pluralistic and holistic approach is that it could increase the confusion among students. Pluralism may lead to intellectual nihilism by giving students the right to assume whatever they feel happy with is right. A few students emphasized these risks by stating:

- Student No. 1: At the beginning of the debate different positions should be pointed out more clearly so students would be less confused.
- Student No. 2: I think it would have been easier for me if I have heard professor's lectures on a certain topic before I had to read all the materials. Sometimes during the literature review I had no idea what was going on and which theory is more important.
- Student No. 3: In the debate "pro et contra" we are not always sure what is expected at the end from us.

A variety of findings emerged from the questionnaire. Several quotations show that students recognized the importance, benefits and usefulness of debate as an educational method. The vast majority of students expressed a preference for looking on emerging problems from different theoretical perspectives. Also debates enabled students to think more critically and originally and so they strongly prefer debate as an educational method over the traditional ex-cathedra teaching. The negative side of such a lively debate in the class could be that it can increase some confusion among students. I believe that classroom debate as an educational method can be used for promoting more pluralism and holism in education of today's economists in order to better resolve today's problems.

Debate also enables students and professors to be more mutually engaged in the two-way learning process. Through debate "pro et contra" the roles of the students and teachers have switched and changed, with students increasingly becoming a subject of the educational process and teachers becoming, more than in a traditional role, moderators thereof.

I believe that knowledge is necessarily dispersed and not given completely to anyone since it is embedded not only in a traditional one-way transfer of knowledge from teachers to students but also in relationships among students and professor. I believe that without debate, students can never appropriate entirely new knowledge because some is necessarily dispersed and not given completely to anyone. Through debate, knowledge is increasingly spilling over to other users of knowledge since it is embedded not only in books but also in debates, teamwork and class conversations. As a result, the debate process can become an important trigger of new knowledge creation and a mutual learning process through which knowledge becomes less a private and more a public good.

7. The Role of Technology in “Pro et Contra” Debate

The role of technology in pro et contra debate is not limited only to reading assignments on the course website for the following weekly PhD class. Beside “in vivo” class debate for the PhD students I had also conducted a “virtual class debate” for another course (macroeconomics, undergraduate).

A substantially larger class of 500 (less demanding) students I divided into groups of 35-45 students per each group. The students in a group got a digital identity to get access to the course materials and to the virtual debate room. Administrator fostered the virtual debate and controlled the content, list of participants and grading. Our experiences show it was a less structured conversation among the participants in the particular group. It seems that in comparison to the “in vivo” debate the “virtual” debate was less in depth, a less passionate and mutually engaged learning process.

However, on the other side the “virtual” debate helped us to extend the period of the interactive work. The main motive for the introduction of the “virtual” debate was possibility of the direct engagement of the students after “in vivo” debate was concluded. Accessing the “virtual” debate before and after the “in vivo” class debate enables students to be engaged more time on the particular topic of their interest. The value added of the “virtual” debate is that students can work interactively with other students for a substantially longer period. After the “virtual” debate is concluded the participants have a read only access. The starting and closing dates for the “virtual” debate have to be defined in advance. Upgrading the “in vivo” debate by a “virtual” one leads us to three lifecycles phases of the debate as an educational method: preparation period for the debate, “in vivo” debate in the class and “virtual” debate afterwards.

8. Conclusion

It is my deep belief that reality should have a stronger influence on the education of economists, especially when a growing divergence between reality and theory can no longer be denied. The education of today’s economists is based mainly on the neoclassical approach, which has developed a fairly straightforward and closed system based on rationality, equilibrium, and methodological individualism. The unity of introductory textbooks and academic programs illustrates the high level of domination of the neoclassical school in economics. Its dominant position is mainly perpetuated through the education process as strict methodological rules have become an ideal for the majority of contemporary economists. Such domination of the neoclassical paradigm in economics and in the broad framework of social sciences leads to partial analyses and localized worlds. Because of its self-sufficiency, economic theory has lost the capacity to take an anthropocentric view of the world, which has led to the social irrelevance of the neoclassical paradigm.

I believe that the origins of the social irrelevance of the neoclassical paradigm can be primarily found in the education system. The key goal in the education of today's economists should be to move beyond the paradigmatic approaches in economics and to promote deeper cooperation between different scientific disciplines in order to foster understanding of today's problems and to contribute meaningfully to their solutions.

I firmly believe that debate "pro et contra" as an educational method can help us tremendously in achieving these goals. Debate is an equitably structured rhetorical event in the class about some topic of interest, with opposing advocates alternating before a decision-making body.

Our qualitative study shows that a classroom debate can be a highly efficient educational method for promoting more pluralism and holism in the education of today's economists. The vast majority of students expressed a preference for looking on problems from different perspectives. Also, debates enabled students to think more critically and originally and so they strongly prefer debate as an educational method over the traditional ex-cathedra teaching. The negative side of such a lively debate in the class could be that it can increase some confusion among students.

Debate also enables students and professors to be more mutually engaged in the two-way learning process. Through interactive debate "pro et contra", the roles of the students and teachers have switched, with students increasingly becoming a subject of the educational process and teachers becoming more moderators. Such a change in pedagogical practice introduces a more pluralistic concept and more interactive process of social learning. The debate "pro et contra" becomes a social framework in terms of how it produces new ideas and arguments through greater student engagement than in a traditional one-way transfer of knowledge from teachers to students.

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