

Session Proposal: The role of workshops, seminars and conferences in the history of economic thought

Session abstract

There are very few history of contemporary economics articles that make no mention, as a background, of an important conference, workshop or seminar. Yet, there are very few articles taking them as the central protagonist. This session presents two case studies and an attempt at generalizing from these as well as other cases from 20th century economics.

Robert Dimand (Brock University) will outline how the annual Cowles Summer research conference held from 1935 to 1940 created an international forum and a community for mathematical economists and econometricians in a way that Econometric Society meetings did not.

Pedro Texeira (University of Porto) will study the role of the Columbia Labor Workshop in disseminating human capital theory in an apparently adverse intellectual environment – Columbia was associated with old institutionalism.

Beatrice Cherrier (CNRS & University of Cergy) and Aurélien Saïdi (University of Nanterre, session chair) will reflect on the role of workshops in sharpening tools, disseminating approaches, debate and research cultures, establishing networks, building bridges and negotiating consensus across the 20th century. They will also discuss the extent to which the role of workshops and conferences differs in other sciences and across fields, and whether organizational characteristics (size, recurrence, openness, turnover, etc.) shape intellectual and institutional outcomes.

Keywords

Workshops, Cowles Commission, Human Capital, Networks.

Dimand's paper (abstract)

The Cowles Commission for Research in Economics held six month-long summer research conferences in Colorado Springs from 1935 to 1940 that, together with the closely-related meetings of the Econometric Society, created a forum for mathematically-inclined economic theorists and economic statisticians to interact and present their research for constructive criticism by a sympathetic audience, at a time when only a small minority of the economics discipline was receptive to such research. Unlike the Econometric Society meetings, which like other conferences of other associations lasted only a weekend with parallel multi-paper sessions, the Cowles conferences lasted a month with half a day per paper, plus public lectures. Extensive summaries of the papers, averaging three single-spaced pages per paper, were published in the annual conference volume, with many of the full papers submitted to *Econometrica* (a journal founded with Alfred Cowles's personal guarantee to pay the journal's annual deficit). In addition to American mathematical economists, economist theorists and statisticians such as Griffith Evans, Mordecai Ezekiel, Irving Fisher, Henry Schultz, and Holbrook Working, the conferences regularly attracted such European scholars as Ragnar Frisch, Trygve Haavelmo, Abba Lerner, Jacob Marschak, René Roy and Abraham Wald, and less frequently other notable figures from W. Edwards Deming and H. Gregg Lewis to Karl Menger and Joseph Schumpeter. For example, the morning of July 12, 1940, was devoted to Wassily Leontief on "Some Results of an Empirical Study of the General Equilibrium," the afternoon to Paul Samuelson on "The Stability of Equilibrium." At a time of very limited US Government funding of research (except in agriculture), Alfred Cowles 3rd played a crucial role in sponsoring the mathematical turn in economics and economic statistics, comparable to the role of Alfred Loomis in American physics in the 1930s, and the Annual Research Conferences on Economics and Statistics brought together the leading participants in that turn for intensive and protracted intellectual exchanges (far beyond what was possible in short parallel sessions at the brief Econometric Society meetings) while enjoying Cowles's generous hospitality (except, as Paul Samuelson ruefully noted, when the prohibitionist teetotaler and near-vegetarian Irving Fisher was present). The Colorado years of the Cowles Commission and especially its summer conferences helped build a community of scholars devoted to "the advancement of economic theory in relation to mathematics and statistics" that extended beyond the creation of an influential institution, the Cowles Commission at the University of Chicago (1939-55) and its successor, the Cowles Foundation at Yale.

This paper is part of a larger project on the history of the Cowles Commission and Cowles Foundation, funded by a research fellowship from the Cowles Foundation for Research in Economics at Yale University.

Teixeira's paper (abstract)

Human capital theory is usually associated with several economists of the Chicago and the Columbia Departments of Economics such as T. W. Schultz or Gary Becker, and Jacob Mincer. Their efforts to develop a community of researchers interested in human capital and to build

institutional support to pursue the activities of the group was essential for the progressive institutionalization of human capital research in contemporary economics. One major step in that respect was the Columbia Labour Workshop, which was established by Gary Becker and Jacob Mincer in the early sixties.

This paper aims to understand better the role of the CLW in the development of human capital research and the progressive influence of neoclassical economics in labour research in the 1960s and 1970s. The analysis will detail the members of the CLW, mapping individuals and topics of research. The analysis will also highlight the strong personal and intellectual links that were developed through the CLW and the impact it had in the evolution of human capital research and neoclassical labor economics, the major topics they aimed to promote.