



## Response

# The Tradeoff between Nuance and Clarity

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I agree with David Colander more than readers of his piece may at first suspect. Like David, I am a defender of economics from its critics. Like David, my goal as a teacher is to offer the students tools, rather than rules. Or to put it differently, my goal is to empower them with a new way of thinking, a new way to view to the world, rather than to have them memorize a set of settled conclusions. Like David, I believe students should try to develop an understanding of economics steeped in the nuances of history, institutions, human imperfection, and recognition of the limits of our current knowledge. (And like David, I am a fan of Yoram Bauman's wonderful parody of my ten principles.)

Although David and I agree on the goals of the introductory course in economics, we seem to disagree about the pedagogical tactics used to reach those goals. By all means, students should leave the course with a nuanced understanding of the field. But before we can aspire to nuance, we must first achieve clarity. To keep students engaged and on the right track, we need to start simple and then add nuance as their understanding grows.

Consider how a child learns mathematics. A 3-year-old starts by counting: 1, 2, 3, and so on. This is, of course, a simplistic view of the large variety of numbers. It fails to solve all sorts of problems. To solve  $x+2=0$ , we need negative numbers; to solve  $2x-1=0$ , we need fractional numbers; to solve  $x^2-2=0$ , we need irrational numbers; and to solve  $x^2+1=0$ , we need imaginary numbers. Counting with whole numbers sweeps all that nuance under the rug! But that is okay. The right way to learn mathematics is to start with the simple case of whole numbers and then add nuance as the student is ready to handle it. An instructor who tries to teach too much too early runs the risk of intimidating or overwhelming the student.

Learning economics is much the same. The ten principles in my textbook, which David quotes, are introduced in the first chapter. They are aimed at the student who has never studied economics before. The goal is to give a brief and understandable introduction to the field, a general sense of where we are heading, and a foundation for the material to come. To add a lot of nuance at this early stage in the course would sacrifice too much clarity.

Subsequent chapters of my book add a lot of nuance. Otherwise, why would I need more than 800 pages to fully introduce the field? Nuance begins in the second chapter, where the student starts to learn about economic methodology, the distinction between positive and normative statements, and the value and risks of simplification in model building. More nuance is added as various substantive topics are discussed. The micro section of the book ends with a chapter on asymmetric information, political economy, and behavioral economics. The macro section of the book ends with a chapter on several open debates about macroeconomics policy, offering arguments on both the pro and con sides. Even though the student does not leave Chapter 1 with a full appreciation of the nuances of economic thinking, she should finish the book with it.



Instructors who teach introductory economics, as I do, face the difficult but inevitable task of deciding what material to include and what not to include. The right answer will vary from instructor to instructor, depending on the length of term, the backgrounds of the students in the class, and the instructor's personal judgments about the importance of various topics. I try to write my book in a way that can accommodate a large variety of instructor needs and perspectives.

My own view is that it is better to teach less material clearly than more material opaquely. Toward that end, in my *Principles* text, I omit some topics that other textbook authors have chosen to include. For example, I talk about the distribution of income but skip the Lorenz curve and the Gini coefficient. I talk about industrial concentration but skip the Herfindahl index. I teach Keynesian ideas such as aggregate demand and the multiplier but skip the geometric apparatus that Samuelson introduced, sometimes called the Keynesian Cross. In making these decisions, I am guided by the fact that, in introductory economics, the typical student is not a future economist but is a future voter. I include the topics that I believe are essential to help produce well-informed citizens.

As an instructor of introductory economics and as a textbook writer, I view myself as an ambassador for the economics profession. I have been sent to a strange land — the land of 18-year-olds. My job there is not to represent my personal views of either economics or public policy but to represent the views of my profession. In doing so, I acknowledge that economics is a broad field. While some topics command consensus among economists, other topics are hotly debated, and I strive to be honest about that fact. We owe our students both clarity and nuance. But nuance introduced too early can sacrifice clarity, muddle the message, and leave students unsure about what to think.