



Associative Financial Literacy

Accompanying the journey of life

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Brazil's Women-Warrior Entrepreneurs

And the work of ConTBem

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We teach finance and double-entry bookkeeping for the purpose of developing and encouraging people to find their place in the world.

Everyone has come across situations that have led one to question the way we human beings organize ourselves to obtain and share the material goods we need. The chaos in which we live, the disagreements, the polarization of ideas, widespread poverty, huge wealth imbalance with its visible and terrible consequences, are the result of economic processes and interests that often appear unknown, inaccessible, and beyond our ability to change.

And yet, are these conditions really unavoidable? Do we really have no control over what is outside us? We may not have direct power and influence over most macroeconomic policy decisions, but it is important to recognize that macroeconomics is the result of the sum of all our individual decisions – mine, yours, all of us. Today, more than ever, we know that we are all connected and that the economy is a worldwide process. A deed done on one side of the world, a purchase or a loan, can and will affect someone on the other side of the planet, even if we are not aware of it in our daily lives.

We can ask ourselves, therefore: what do we need to do in order to achieve abundance in our own lives at the same time as contributing to a more harmonious and positive whole? What would be possible?

To answer this, it is necessary to understand a little better how the economy works. Know your field and its history. Increasingly study it and practice it. There is also a strong polarization among the well-known economic schools. Many economists believe that production, distribution and consumption must be planned and controlled, normally assigning this role to the state, while others defend freedom for all in their economic decisions, pointing to the efficiency of markets. Given that none of these models has yet resolved this issue, is there then another possibility?

Rudolf Steiner's Contribution to Economics

In an economics course given by Rudolf Steiner nearly 100 years ago,¹ one finds quite other ways of understanding and conducting economic life. Without bringing specific solutions, he points to the dynamic and complex character of the economy. Steiner invites us to reflect on it, urging us to seek to understand how economic phenomena occur and how to find better alternatives to the economic realities in which we live.

His is a new, non-materialistic view of the economy, which takes the human being as *the* reference. It is human beings, through the expansion of their consciousness, that bring answers to the challenges we need to face. This nascent school is called 'associative economics'.

¹ Given to business people and students of economics in Dornach, Switzerland in 1922, available in English as *Economics – the World as One Economy* (search aeBookstore.com).

My personal quest led me to readings and participating in projects aimed at answering these questions, and in particular, to participate in the Economics Conference of the Goetheanum,² a permanent forum for the study and research of Rudolf Steiner's economic ideas.

One of the projects of the Economics Conference is to promote financial literacy for youth and adults,³ the aim of which is to encourage economically active and conscious people; masters of their destinies, not masters of universes; authors not victims of their circumstances.

In our associative finance courses, financial tools and especially the use of double-entry bookkeeping⁴ emerge as a form of self-management and perception of our relationship with the world. When properly understood and executed, double-entry bookkeeping is a great springboard for understanding the economy, as well as offering us a faithful mirror of who we are and our economic performance on earth.

ContBem is born

In 2016, we had the opportunity to hold four awareness-raising workshops on the topic of economics and finance for employees of Instituto Anchieta Grajaú – IAG.⁵ ContBem emerged from these workshops, based in part on the content developed through the Economics Conference, especially an exhibition held in Folkestone, England.⁶

Over the course of two years, we developed and transmitted content on double-entry bookkeeping, finance and associative economics to 250 socially vulnerable young people, aged between 16 and 18, and residents of Grajaú on the southern periphery of São Paulo.

This initiative provided young people with valuable learning and discoveries, however, unfortunately, it had to be stopped in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Distance learning for that low-income population proved to be unfeasible.

In 2021, we decided to resume ContBem. We consulted the leaders of the Anchieta Institute to see if there would be a demand for an activity like this for an adult audience. We were asked to design a specific course for women in situations of social vulnerability. This proposal emerged from a survey carried out by the non-governmental organisation, PEABIRU, which interviewed about 900 people from the Anchieta settlement, located close to the IAG, and found that 61% of the settlement's homes are under the responsibility of women (including 32% single mothers).

The plan was extensively discussed with the IAG coordinators and representatives of the Global Care Foundation,⁷ who contributed their knowledge of the local population and ideas on goals, care and outcome expectations and strategies to achieve them.

The final design included tracking three of the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN 2030 agenda: (1) Eradication of Poverty, (4) Quality Education, and (8) Decent Work and Economic Growth.

We included in the project budget an amount to be allocated as seed capital for final projects that were presented in the form of a business plan, under our guidance, and that required financial leverage.

In order to map the local demand for the content, we carried out a survey with the population and obtained 19 spontaneous responses from women living in Grajaú, expressing interest in the topic of entrepreneurship and finance.

Women Entrepreneurs

This is how ContBem / Women Entrepreneurs was born.

As in previous courses, the program and pedagogical strategy were structured along two axes:

² Economics Conference of the Goetheanum: <https://economics.goetheanum.org/home/>

³ See associative-financial-literacy.com

⁴ Double-entry bookkeeping is used the world over ever since its formalising by Luca Pacioli in the Renaissance.

⁵ IAG – Anchieta Grajaú Institute – organization with the objective of promoting the inclusion of families, children and adolescents in situations of social vulnerability. <https://institutoanchietagrajau.org.br/>

⁶ 7-minute video of the exhibition: <https://youtu.be/3lcpUgvSXtc>

⁷ <https://global-care.knorr-bremse.com/en/>

- a) teaching economics and finance tools themselves, and
- b) the promotion of participants' self-development and self-knowledge.

Our teaching methodology seeks to be as playful and engaging as possible, with an emphasis on the importance of both each one's interest and joint creation.

Being a pilot project, the need to adjust, be creative and introduce new strategies was always present. To achieve good results, it was especially important to consider the demands, contexts and possibilities of our students and partners.

We set the students the goal of preparing a personal and individual project for the end of the course. These should be centred around their business, if any, or any aspect of personal development they wanted to achieve. The projects should include a cash flow budget. We knew this was an ambitious goal, and indeed not everyone was able to achieve perfect cash flow. However, at least all of them realized the importance of being aware of their financial life.

We realized the urgency for women to obtain resources and, with this aim, we created a *Laboratory of Associative Economics*. This took place before the Christmas break (when people usually get together) so that they could practice their entrepreneurship as soon as possible.

In this protected and caring environment, the women presented their businesses, along with the numbers that accompanied them. They were also able to make sales, which was an excellent motivator. We found that the Laboratory, simulating real life, is an incredibly good and positive teaching tool that brings confidence and increases the self-esteem of entrepreneurs. In this context, they also had the opportunity of effective mutual support within the theme of a new economy.

Results

During the six months of the project, our ConTBem team could get closer, meet our 'students' and witness their commitment and development. The result was incredibly good and surpassed all expectations.

The group included women who are in extreme poverty and others who already had their lives a little more stabilized. Many were already entrepreneurs, including formal businesses, others had sporadic experiences of selling homemade cakes or crafts, others had never undertaken anything of this kind in their lives. Schooling was also diverse and extreme. For example, one woman had graduated in pedagogy, while another did not know how to write.

This diversity brought a lot of richness to our course and surprised us with the great generosity and level of cooperation experienced. Is this associative economics in action? Understanding that we depend on each other was discussed in the course.

We had the opportunity to capitalize five ventures that needed cash leverage. For this, we partially used seed capital. This fact had a double importance – to leverage these businesses, which explained their needs through statements, and to explain in practice the importance of the circulation of capital.

One of our students, who owns a thrift store, made an inventory of her merchandise for the first time, finding out how much she has by purchase and sale prices. Another enrolled during ConTBem in pedagogy, fulfilling an old dream. A third, who could not read, decided to enrol in a literacy course.

Others still managed to get formal employment during the course, and one of them continued to be a distance student, as she wanted to be able to set up her business in homemade breads on weekends. Many similar stories could be told.

The two groups of ConTBem / Women Entrepreneurs came to an end, with twenty-four women presenting themselves one by one in public, talking about their individual projects and the changes that ConTBem brought in their lives. For those from the IAG and other institutions who attended the presentations were very moving.

I am grateful to the women warriors who inspired us and continue to inspire us in this work and to everyone who contributed to the development of ConTBem, especially to the current team, without whom it would not be possible to achieve this level of quality: Flavio Baroboskin, Mariana Moura and Raquel Calcina, with whom I hope to work together well into the future.