

THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast

Transcript for Episode 6: A Conversation with Tyler on Education

Interview Date: 01/15/19

Host: Amina Derbi Guest: Professor Tyler Cowen

Amina: Welcome everyone, this is Amina, and you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of AEMS-PC, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Policy Center, an education policy think tank at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought. The purpose of our podcast (Third Space Thoughts to Policy) is to hear from experts and stakeholders in the field of education policy reform including policy advisors, governmental officials, academics, teachers, and parents. If you’re interested in joining the conversation so we can work towards progress and understanding together, please visit our website at iiit.org, and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. You can listen to our podcast on Stitcher, Spotify, iTunes, or Apple Podcasts, Messy FM, Google Play or Podcast Mirror. If you like listening to the content you hear, please subscribe and leave a review at the end. That helps other listeners tune in as well. Just a reminder that we’re still collecting applications for IIIT’s new Master’s degree program in partnership with American University.

As mentioned last time, American University’s International Training and Education Program has partnered with the International Institute of Islamic Thought to offer a Master’s degree program towards Advancing Education in Muslim Societies. The International Training and Educational Program – Advancing Education in Muslim Societies - so the acronym for that is ITEP-AEMS – is a unique opportunity to earn a Master’s degree in international education and training with a focus on Muslim societies from a reputable university like American University, in the U.S. capital of Washington D.C.! This is a one-year 30-credit hour program, beginning July 2019. Sign up today!

For more information, please visit IIIT’s website at iiit.org. Just scroll to the bottom where you see announcements and there it’ll be! So again to apply, just visit our website, and if you know someone who would be interested to apply, please share this with them! We look forward to receiving your applications. Good luck to all applicants!

We’re really looking forward to speaking with our next guest. Tyler Cohen is Holbert L. Harris Professor of Economics at George Mason University, and also director of the Mercatus Center. He received his Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard University in 1987. His book, *The Great Stagnation: How America Ate the Low-Hanging Fruit of Modern History, Got Sick, and Will (Eventually) Feel Better*, was a New York Time’s best-seller. He was recently named in an economist poll as one of the most influential economists of the last decade, and several years ago, Bloomberg Business Week dubbed him “America’s Hottest Economist.” Foreign Policy Magazine named him as one of its top 100 global thinkers of 2011. He also co-writes a blog at www.marginalrevolution.com, runs a podcast series titled “Conversations with Tyler,” and he has co-founded an online economics education project, called MRUniversity.com. His last book was *Stubborn Attachments: A Vision for a Society of Free, Prosperous, and Responsible Individuals*.

Amina: Hello and welcome Tyler! How are you doing today?

Tyler: I’m doing fine out here in Northern Virginia.

Amina: That's wonderful! Well we're so excited to have you on the show with us today. I'm going to dive right into our questions for you. So, the first one is what first led you to pursue a career in education?

Tyler: Well I was thirteen or fourteen, and I had been spending a lot of my time playing chess when I discovered that just reading serious non-fiction books was more interesting. I just kept on reading philosophy and also economics, and then I started thinking what kind of job can I have where I can do this for the rest of my life? Then it seemed – this was in the 1970s – education was clearly the way to go! So, I became an educator, an academic, a professor, and I'm still reading books and of course also teaching them.

Amina: Thanks for explaining that. So, what does holistic education mean for you, or what do you think is the best way for education to focus on the overall wellbeing of students?

Tyler: Well I think education should teach students to look at a problem from many different angles, not just one. So even when I teach economics, I try to integrate philosophy, or law, or the reasoning of political science or perspectives from travel. So for me, what you're calling holistic education is a sense that you need to understand a larger picture rather than just any other subject. That's very hard to teach, in the way that you teach it a bit through presence and personality, and that people somehow absorb how you attack problems. They need to see you live in the flesh doing that, looking at things with this broader perspective. Holistic is a tricky word, it means different things to different people. But I suppose that's how I understand it.

Amina: Well that's a very interesting perspective. We appreciate you sharing that with us, and you make a very good point about how important it is to set a good example, and how educators have such an important role in providing a living, breathing example for their students. At George Mason University, you mainly teach economics.

Tyler: I also teach in the law school! I also teach law and literature, which is a humanities course, so that's an example of holistic approach. So, half my teaching is economics, but half is in the law school.

Amina: That's good to know. Thank you for sharing that with me. Do you have a preference which one you prefer to teach?

Tyler: I suppose my preference is to both, precisely because of this idea of different perspectives. I probably learn more teaching in the law school, because it's a little more foreign to me, obviously. I have to put in more time and work; that's part of the challenge and the excitement.

Amina: Wonderful. When it comes to economics, or teaching economics, do you think there's a way, or a subject, to be taught with a framework of empathy or compassion being the core? Or in your opinion, does that go against basic economic principles?

Tyler: Well I would draw a distinction between what it is you're teaching and the person teaching it. So the person teaching it should show compassion for the broader world and caring, let's say, about lifting people out of poverty and improving their lives. I don't think the material itself should be value-related. So in a sense you're teaching people to be analytic and dispassionate, and that's a funny kind of balance that the professor ought to really care but the material in a sense ought to stay

fairly abstract. You're bridging a kind of dialectical contradiction and they ought to be able to see both sides of that and somehow keep these ideas and feelings in their head at the same time. That's not easy to do, but that's, I think a correct way to teach economic material.

Amina: Great, thank you. You also host a podcast, "Conversations with Tyler." I'm subscribed to that. A few of your guests—

Tyler: Thank you!

Amina: Anytime! A few of your guests have also talked about important topics relating to education. Which conversation was the most meaningful to you and why?

Tyler: The conversation with Agnes Callard about aspiration, how education is aiming to be something different than you are in the future, but you don't know exactly what that different thing is. If you knew exactly what you wanted it to be, that would be ambition. But aspiration is a broader and more open-ended concept, and all this from her book *Aspiration*, it was just written up in the *New Yorker*. It'll be out in the January 21st edition. And that was part of my conversation with her as well – this broader notion of education as aspiration.

Amina: Oh wow, I'll be looking forward to reading that when it comes out. The 21st you said?

Tyler: Yes, and I'll be linking to it on *Marginal Revolution* later today.

Amina: Okay, perfect! Thank you! Well that was really insightful. We appreciate you sharing that with us. What do you think are the largest problems with education systems today in general? And what are your thoughts on how best to address them?

Tyler: I'm not sure how to fix them – I think the largest problem is you have too many mediocre or un-caring or checked out professors in classrooms. That's by far the biggest problem. If you get a really good professor in the room, good things will happen. But if someone simply becomes mediocre, or maybe never left being mediocre, it's hard to get them out of there given the way tenure works and just given general inertia and status quo bias with non-profit institutions. I wish I had a way to solve that problem, but I think that's more than half of the problems we have. I also think education should in some ways be more consumer oriented so there should be even more over the summer, there should be more online classes, there should be more night classes. There should be more kind of mixed-media classes of the kind that maybe don't obviously fit into a three-credit framework. Where you just do something intensively for a week and then it's over, and that's hard to fit in the current system. So, I think we just need more innovation.

Amina: Those are very good points, thank you. Well, wonderful, thanks so much for joining us today Tyler. We really appreciate your time and thoughts, and we wish you all the best with your current and future projects and look forward to keeping in touch!

Tyler: Same to you!

[transition]

Amina: Thank you for all listening! To stay up-to-date on everything happening with the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, follow IIT on Twitter (@IITfriends) and Instagram (@iit_insta). You won't want to miss our next episode! And as a reminder, you can listen to this podcast on Stitcher, iTunes and Apple Podcasts, Messy.FM, GooglePlay, and Podcast Mirror. If you liked what you listened to today, please subscribe and leave a review. That helps other people find our content as well! If you have any questions for us or would like to join the conversation, please reach out to me. My email is amina@iit.org. Thank you all for listening, and we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!