



**TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS
WORKING PAPER SERIES**

Pluralism in Economics Education

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Working Paper Nr. 11-02

January 2011

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Forthcoming in *International Handbook on Teaching and Learning Economics*,
KimMarie McGoldrick and Gail Hoyt, eds., Edward Elgar (2011)

Introduction

Pluralism has been a rallying cry for openness and broad-mindedness in economics since the early 1980s, when the methodological and epistemological monism of post-World War II economics was incisively challenged by McCloskey (1983) and others (Negru 2009). In 1992, the *American Economic Review* published a ‘Plea for a Pluralistic and Rigorous Economics’ (Hodgson, Mäki, and McCloskey 1992, p. xxv), a petition signed by forty-four leading economists, including four Nobel laureates, calling for “a new spirit of pluralism in economics, involving critical conversation and tolerant communication between different approaches” and demanding that this pluralist spirit be “reflected in the character of scientific debate, in the range of contributions in its journals, and in the training and hiring of economists.”

The pluralist campaign found vocal allies in economics education. Feminist economists led the way, posing pluralist objections and alternatives to received models of economics education (Bartlett and Feiner 1992, Shackelford 1992, Aerni et al. 1999, Lewis 1999). In 2000 and 2001, the push for pluralism in graduate and undergraduate economics became an international *cause célèbre* when petitions from Ph.D. students and professors in France, the U.K., the U.S., and Italy sparked the formation of the Post-Autistic Economics (PAE) movement (Fullbrook 2003). This student-led movement called for “a total overhaul of economics and economics teaching,” guided by a principled pluralism that “rejects the idea that any school [of thought] could possess final or total solutions, but accepts all as possible means for

understanding real-life economic problems” (Fullbrook 2003, pp. 8-9). The pluralistic ethos of the PAE movement inspired economists across the globe to think anew about the goals and tools of economics education (Groenewegen 2007, Fullbrook 2009, Reardon 2009).

Our task in this chapter is to describe the nature and importance of pluralism in undergraduate economics education. We distinguish pluralist and monist approaches to economics education and situate the former within the classical tradition of liberal education. Liberal education offers a generative framework – a shared language and philosophy – in which economists of all schools can craft pluralistic alternatives to monist texts, courses, and curricula. Against the backdrop of these fundamental ideas, we discuss the types of courses and pedagogies through which instructors have implemented pluralist ideals. Finally, we consider the educational benefits and costs of pluralist education in economics, and strategies for mitigating these costs.

Pluralism vs. monism in economics education

Pluralism and monism are each embedded in received approaches to economic science and economics education, as distinct views of knowledge and learning (Caldwell 1988). The monist approach presupposes a scientific consensus about ‘good economics’ – a core of foundational concepts, methods, and propositions that is “accepted by all but a few extreme left-wing and right-wing writers” (Samuelson 1967, pp. 197-98). The notion of a singular economic way of thinking is a hallmark of Samuelsonian monism. The main task of economics education, from a monist perspective, is to teach the prevailing orthodoxy. For example, the elimination of history of economic thought courses during the 1980s was directly inspired by monist thinking, particularly the arguments of Stigler (1969) and Samuelson (1987), who claimed that all relevant

ideas from previous thinkers were embodied in the prevailing mainstream consensus (Boulding 1971, pp. 556 and 559; see also Negru 2009).

Pluralists, in contrast, see economics as a polycentric discipline comprised of “not one, but many sciences of economics” (Denis 2009, p. 7). Through a pluralist lens, reductionist depictions of economics as a ‘single coherent view’ are factually misleading and pedagogically counterproductive. As Ferber argues, “It is difficult, if not impossible, to teach economics effectively while pretending that there is consensus in the discipline about either theory or policy. . . Ignoring these issues deprives students of learning about the most thought-provoking discussions of the profession” (1999, pp. 137-38). Pluralists believe that every undergraduate economics program should introduce students to the intellectual diversity of economic science.

Similar differences can be seen in economists’ tacit conceptions of learning itself. In contrast to the monist view of education as a one-way transmission of knowledge from authorities (teachers, textbooks) to novices, pluralist educators emphasize the multiplicity of voices in the educational process (Bartlett and Feiner 1992, p. 563). Feminists, for example, see student learning as a byproduct of decentralized interactions among many minds (Shackelford 1992), including the ‘mind’ of the subject matter itself (Palmer 1999). The implied contrast here is not simply ‘top-down’ monism vs. ‘bottom-up’ pluralism. Pluralists recognize that every educational process includes a ‘top-down’ element due to the hierarchical nature of the instructor/student relationship. The pivotal contrast lies in the pluralist commitment to liberal education as an epistemically inclusive enterprise wherein students and instructors interact not as equals but as partners in the process of inquiry.

To cultivate students’ willingness and ability to engage in semi-autonomous inquiry, pluralists believe that the standard goal of “thinking like an economist” should include the liberal

art of critical thinking (Thoma 1993, Garnett and Butler 2009). In the tradition of Dewey (1933) and Perry (1970), critical thinking is defined as a process of reflective judgment, “making judgments in the context of uncertainty” (Borg and Borg 2001, p. 20). Pluralists contend that “thinking like an economist” is often confined to analytical thinking: the “complex correct thinking . . . required to solve problems where there is a single right answer” (Nelson 1997, p. 62; Negru 2010). To address this educational gap, pluralists suggest that economic educators should supplement analytical exercises, even at the introductory level, with ‘big think’ questions: ill-structured problems that require students to confront analytical and normative ambiguity (Colander and McGoldrick 2009).

Critics of educational pluralism worry that a premature emphasis on ambiguity or controversy may weaken student motivation and reduce learning. Too much complexity too soon “risks undermining the entire venture . . . with too many qualifications and alternatives [so that] teachers and their students may abandon economics entirely out of frustration born of confusion and uncertainty” (Siegfried and Meszaros 1997, p. 249). Pluralist educators are acutely aware of these dangers. Yet in their view the greater danger and disservice to their students would be to suppress the fact that economics “contains more than one approach, more than one theory, and more than one proposed solution to every problem it faces” (Freeman 2009, p. 7).

Pluralist education as liberal education

Long before the PAE movement hoisted the pluralist flag, the Socratic-pluralist goal of teaching students to think for themselves was shared by an array of economics educators (Fels 1974, Barone 1991, Moseley et al. 1991, Siegfried et al. 1991, Shackelford 1992, Ferber 1999). The

common thread linking these diverse endeavors is the project of liberal education. In the words of British economist George Shackle:

The first task of the University teacher of any liberal art is surely to persuade his students that the most important things he will put before them are questions and not answers. He is going to put up for them a scaffolding, and leave them to build within it. He has to persuade them that they have not come to the University to learn as it were by heart things which are already hard-and-fast and cut-and-dried, but to watch and perhaps help in a process, the driving of a causeway which will be made gradually firmer by the traffic of many minds (Shackle 1953, p. 18).

Though cherished by a minority of economics educators, the vision of the economics as a “liberal art” has never won broad professional support, in part because its leading advocates – mainstream and heterodox – have been unable to sustain collaborative ties across the methodological, ideological, and sociological divisions of our profession.

The recently published volume by Colander and McGoldrick (2009) offers new hope. The diversity of contributors and convergence of themes in this collection suggest that the time may be ripe for new coalitions of mainstream and heterodox educators to rethink undergraduate economics through the lens of liberal education. In addition, the recent shift in the U.S., U.K., and other nations’ higher education industries from content- to outcome-based measures of learning offers further reason for hope. Outcomes-based education systems facilitate the achievement of pluralist educational goals in two ways: (1) making it relatively easy to institute pluralist learning outcomes, since these outcomes generally echo the overarching academic, vocational, and citizenship goals of liberal education (Denis 2009, Freeman 2009, O’Donnell 2009, Dow 2009, Garnett 2009); and (2) increasing the likelihood of compliance by affording

departments and instructors the freedom to devise their own methods for achieving the stated outcomes, based on their unique histories, priorities, and constraints.

Pluralist economics education in practice

Existing strategies for introducing pluralism into undergraduate economics programs fall into three broad categories. For individual courses, the classic strategy is still the ‘contending perspectives’ model (Barone 1991) in which students are introduced to the core concepts and methods of various economic paradigms (Moseley et al. 1991, Feiner and Roberts 1995, Underwood 2007, O’Donnell 2009). Such courses can be offered at the introductory, intermediate, or upper level. Their general objectives are to introduce students to theoretical perspectives and arguments beyond those covered in standard texts and to increase students’ ability to understand, employ, and assess economic arguments from multiple perspectives.¹

A second type of pluralist course is the problem-centered ‘big toolbox’ approach (Nelson 2009). This approach puts economic problems rather than theories in the forefront and asks students to use concepts from their ‘toolbox’ to analyze these problems. Nelson (2009) finds this an effective method for infusing pluralism and critical thinking into introductory micro- and macroeconomics courses. Similar strategies have been proposed for the introductory microeconomics course (Diduch 1999, Peterson 1999, McDonough 2008, Raveaud 2009) and for upper-level courses in monetary/macroeconomics (Kinsella 2010, Dow 2009), labor economics (Champlin and Weins-Tuers 2009), and international economics (Warnecke 2009). For example, Champlin and Weins-Tuers (2009) describe a pluralist labor economics course organized around a series of topics (discrimination, labor supply, wage differentials, labor market structure and the concept of labor itself), each of which is explored from multiple perspectives.

A third way to promote pluralist outcomes – to increase students’ capacity to engage economic ideas critically and creatively – is to add complementary courses or learning experiences to standard economics curricula. Hodgson (2002), for example, advocates the addition of a social science literacy course, much as Dow (2009) suggests adding a course on methodology and the history of economic thought. More recently, McGoldrick (1999) and Peterson and McGoldrick (2009) have proposed service learning as an effective means to achieve pluralistic learning goals (see also Banks, Schneider, and Susman 2005).

Is pluralism worth it?

As vividly conveyed by Earl’s account of “the perils of pluralistic teaching” (2002), the common expectation that instructors are supposed to deliver “the present state of knowledge in neatly packaged form” (2002, p. 2) leads some students to resist pluralist pedagogies. Economics instructors and students often require encouragement and concrete support as they navigate the transition from monistic to pluralistic modes of teaching and learning (Dow 2009, pp. 53-54). For teachers, the adoption of pluralist pedagogies is likely to create more work and greater fears of failure, at least initially. Gathering appropriate course materials and experimenting with unfamiliar classroom strategies is generally more stressful and time consuming than preparing for lectures, particularly when instructors’ own educational backgrounds provide few resources or role models for teaching economics in a pluralistic manner (Colander and McGoldrick 2009, pp. 3-42; see also Nelson 1999, p. 178). For students too, pluralist education can create added anxiety and frustration. Perry claims that every step in the process of intellectual development “involves not only the joy of realization but also a loss of certainty and an altered sense of self”

(Perry 1989, cited in Kloss 1994, p. 157). In view of these obstacles, an economist must ask: do the educational benefits of pluralist outweigh the costs?

Due to the relative youth of the pluralist literature, few investigators have attempted to assess the relative merits of pluralist vs. monist approaches to economics education. One preliminary study that has already received considerable attention (Mearman et al. forthcoming) reports qualitative data from focus groups at five UK universities. The authors explore student experiences and perceptions of course modules conducted in a pluralist manner. As expected, some students expressed frustration and disappointment about the multiplicity of economic perspectives. One student remarked, “I just find it difficult to say that economics as a body can explain something” (Mearman et al. forthcoming, 21). Other students found the emphasis on theoretical differences to be exaggerated or “unnecessary” (*ibid.*, 22). O’Donnell (2009) reports similar perceptions based on an end-of-course questionnaire administered to students in a pluralistic intermediate-level course at the University of Sydney, Australia.

With regard to the educational advantages of pluralism, the findings of Mearman et al. (forthcoming) suggest that pluralist modules create increased student interest and engagement (*ibid.*, 21), an increased ability to debate or argue a case (*ibid.*, 17), “the development of intellectual capacities and practical skills” such as “greater capacity for judgment” (*ibid.*, 14), writing skills (*ibid.*, 21), and the value of looking at problems from different perspectives (*ibid.*, 17). O’Donnell (2009) and Mearman et al. (forthcoming) also underscore the human capital advantages of pluralist courses: how they “make students more employable” (Mearman et al. forthcoming, 14) by conferring a broader suite of transferable skills and dispositions than comparable monist courses. Anecdotal evidence suggests that pluralist courses generate broader and deeper learning for instructors too. Warnecke (2009), after attempting a pluralist revision to

her international economics course, observes that “the value of teaching from a pluralist perspective is not simply encouragement of critical thinking in students, but in professors as well. It is a mutual learning experience, which is the essence of a university education” (p. 98).

These provisional results suggest that the net advantages of pluralist methods may indeed be positive, especially when institutional and professional resources are available to offset some of the transition costs for instructors and students. Insofar as pluralist education cultivates students’ intellectual autonomy, it multiplies their opportunities to achieve ‘significant learning’ (Fink 2003). In the absence of such opportunities, even high-achieving economics students show a limited ability to apply theoretical principles to real-life personal, professional, and public problems (Salemi and Siegfried 1999, Hansen, Salemi, and Siegfried 2002, Katz and Becker 1999, Walstad and Allgood 1999). Pluralist revisions of Samuelsonian economics – i.e., the (re) infusion of liberal arts goals and tools into traditional undergraduate courses and curricula – promise to improve these outcomes by enhancing students’ capacity for creative, critical thought.

Notes

¹ A critical dialogue on the pluralist aims and learning outcomes of the contending perspectives model appears in the *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, volume 2, number 1 (2011).

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