Student attitudes toward economic pluralism: survey-based evidence

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Abstract: A university education should enable and improve students' cognitive abilities. An effective curriculum can help achieve this objective. Teaching that economics is more than just neoclassicism, for example, could aid the transition to higher stages of cognition. That said, even erstwhile supporters are sometimes reluctant to take this step for fear that students may become confused. Also open to question is how much students really develop an ability to select among various paradigms, or if they simply exit a course with their professor's biases. To answer these questions, a survey was conducted among students enrolled in several sections of a Contending Perspectives in Economics course. The data suggest that, far from being disillusioned, they exit the course with great enthusiasm and increased confidence, although somewhat influenced by the instructor's school of thought.

Keywords: pluralism; economics education; Perry; Perry's scheme; heterodox; teaching; contending perspectives.


Biographical notes: John T. Harvey is a Professor of Economics at Texas Christian University. For most of his career he has focused on developing a Post Keynesian/Institutionalist view of exchange rate determination, a research agenda that generated a number of publications in heterodox journals and a book. More recently, he has turned his interest towards economic pluralism and is currently working on a manuscript that is designed for classroom use.

1 Introduction

A university education involves more than acquiring quantities of information. Students’ cognitive abilities should also improve, along with their personal theories of knowledge. Most start college as dualistic thinkers who believe that everything is right or wrong and authority figures, like their professors, are the keepers of 'truth'. They need to learn,
however, that reality is far more complex. In fact, a multiplicity of viewpoints exists and even experts are often uncertain about what they know. If all goes well, students finish their university experience with a world view that resolves them to this ambiguity and enter the world committed to a particular set of values but with an open mind regarding other views and the possibility that their own might be flawed. Though this is not always easy or successful, it is very important that we try.

An effective curriculum can aid in this objective passage. In economics, for example, teaching that economics is more than just a single school of thought could aid the transition to higher stages of cognition (McGoldrick, 2009; Negru, 2010). There is perhaps no better way to acknowledge that even experts disagree and that arguments can be made from a variety of perspectives than to demonstrate the wide range from Austrian to Marxist to Institutionalist, etc. This spread represents not just minor divergences of opinion but disagreements regarding the very nature of economic phenomena and the role of science in understanding it.

That said, opponents of pluralism and even erstwhile supporters are sometimes reluctant to take this step. They fear that students could become confused and lose confidence in their abilities, perhaps abandoning the project altogether and deeming economics a dysfunctional discipline that cannot decide about the most basic concepts. Siegfried and Maszaros exemplify this fear:

“Including strongly held minority views of economic processes risks undermining the entire venture. With too many qualifications and alternatives, teachers and their students may abandon economics entirely out of frustration born of confusion and uncertainty.” [Siegfried and Meszaros, (1997), p.249]

This is hardly our goal. If we are to move pluralism forward, a statement like this should only be made after careful empirical investigation, and not a priori.

Also open to question is how much students really develop an ability to select among various paradigms or if they, for all intents and purposes, exit a course with the their professor’s biases.¹ In this way, classes focusing on surveys of contemporary schools of thought could become more proselytisation than education. Again, this should not be our aim.

These questions must be addressed if we are to ascertain that the integration of economic pluralism into the curriculum facilitates students’ ascension to higher stages of cognitive development. In order to elucidate these issues, a survey was conducted among students enrolled in my Contending Perspectives in Economics (CPE) at Texas Christian University during Fall 2009 – Spring 2011 (see Appendix). The data suggest that, far from being disillusioned, they exit the course with great enthusiasm. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority are now more confident in their knowledge of economics, although evidence exists of influence by the instructor’s school of thought.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin with a short discussion of William Perry’s research on how college students comprehend the nature of knowledge and the learning process. The means by which a pluralistic approach to economics can move students to the higher stages in his scheme is then explained and potential pitfalls outlined. Following this, the survey results are reviewed, particularly in the context of how they elucidate the following questions: one, are students confused/discouraged by their experiences in contending perspectives? And two, is there a tendency for them to adopt the instructor’s perspective as their own? Conclusions follow.
Perry’s scheme

College is a great awakening. This is, according to Perry, the stage at which many young people advance from simplistic dualistic thinking about the world to more sophisticated multiplicity and relativism (Perry, 1970). While this may not occur in everyone and the timing varies, Perry and his colleagues believed they found consistent evidence of these patterns over a long period of time [Perry, (1981), p.77]. He saw students as falling into basic chronological stages:

- **Dualism**: Division of meaning into two realms – good versus bad, right versus wrong. We versus They, All that is not Success is Failure, and the like. Right answers exist somewhere for every problem, and authorities know them. Right answers are to be memorised by hard work. Knowledge is quantitative...

- **Multiplicity**: Diversity of opinion and values is recognised as legitimate in areas where right answers are not yet known… “everyone has a right to his own opinion; none can be called wrong.”

- **Relativism**: Diversity of opinion, values, and judgment derived from coherent sources, evidence, logics, systems, and patterns allowing for analysis and comparison. Some opinions may be found worthless, while there will remain matters about which reasonable people will reasonably disagree. Knowledge is qualitative, dependent on contexts [Perry, (1981), pp.79–80].

Ideally, having passed through each stage, individuals then move on to commitment, with their lives strongly guided by their chosen values, although always willing to learn and respect others and reevaluate their own. Note that Commitment, like Pluralism, does not imply that anything goes and everyone is right, but that absolute truth does not exist and we must therefore continually work hard to evaluate alternative theories to see which holds the greatest explanatory power in a given context. This process never ends.

Essentially, this represents a series of shifts in an individual’s epistemological approach. Typically, a student begins college with the belief that her professors know how the world works, at least within their area of expertise. They will, she assumes, let her in on some subset of their secrets during the course and she will become more ‘educated’ by adding to her knowledge.

Those of us who are the holders of those secrets, however, know that the reality is far more complex. The pursuit of knowledge in a scientific discipline involves stumbling from one uncertain, tentative conclusion to another and maybe back again. It is a constant dialectical or ‘ironic’ [as one of Perry’s students suggested, Perry, (1981), p.96] struggle since, on the one hand, we must act as if we are sure of our theories in order to build explanations of the phenomena we study; on the other, we know that such a state of confidence is not only realistically impossible, but it can act as an impediment if it makes us reluctant to revise theories in the face of contrary evidence. Science is not a black and white process in which scholars slowly replace ‘wrong’ with ‘right’, it is far more dynamic, with a constant balancing act between the fundamental impossibility of ever truly understanding the real world and scholarly inquiries that must pretend otherwise if they are to contribute anything useful. This conception is something for which most first-year college students are unprepared and, unfortunately, not all of them make a successful transition.
For this reason, Perry’s initial descriptive framework became the inspiration for a prescriptive one: Is it possible to construct a curriculum to facilitate students’ progression to higher levels of cognition? Movement from one stage to the next is not necessarily guaranteed so the educator must provide both challenge and support. Particularly important are the transitions, when students become aware that their earlier beliefs were mistaken but they are not yet sure how to proceed. This is natural, of course, and the resulting confusion and angst are not necessarily to be avoided as these provide fuel for the introspection and contemplation necessary to advance to the next stage [Perry, (1981), p.108].

But, this can overwhelm some students who never achieve a satisfactory resolution. They may, for example, angrily reject the possibility of multiple perspectives and cling stubbornly to dualism, a reaction Perry labels retreat [Perry, (1981), p.80]. Or, the student could opt to Escape by accepting multiplicity while avoiding any attempt to do the hard work of evaluating the various positions—they simply give up [Perry, (1981), p.80]. However, if these short circuits can be avoided and the student reaches the Commitment stage, then college can become one of the most significant events in her life. She will have grown well out of proportion to the specific information presented in class and have become a sophisticated life-long learner.

3 Economic pluralism and the Perry scheme

There is a burgeoning literature on economic pluralism, Perry’s scheme, and contending perspectives courses, including a recent symposium in this journal, (Vol. II, No. 1). While the symposium covered a wide range of topics, a common focus (both there and elsewhere) is on particular pedagogical techniques, as Garnett and Mearman (2011, p.7) write in the introductory article:

“Increasingly, however, the definition of what counts as a pluralist course is gravitating toward a greater emphasis on pedagogy (process) and capabilities (student learning outcomes). Many emerging alternatives to the theory-centered CP model employ enquiry-based, problem-based, or experimental learning methods whereby students learn theoretical concepts and empirical facts as demanded by concrete learning situations.”

Scholars in other disciplines have reached similar conclusions, albeit somewhat earlier than economists! Robert Kloss’s (1994, pp.1–2) comments on Perry’s framework within the context of his English courses:

“Several of my conclusions at this point follow: (1) that the best subject matter within my discipline to challenge dualistic students and stimulate such movement is fiction and poetry, especially the latter, since it provides more possibilities for ambiguity, varied interpretations, and multiple perspectives, three of the challenges that constrain adoption of multiplicity and relativism; (2) that small group work used frequently fosters and reinforces the exchange and importance of multiple perspectives; (3) that free guided discussion—with the students talking 80–90 percent of the time—nurture growth because it diminishes the instructor’s authoritative role and increases reliance on peers’ perspectives and contributions to creating knowledge; and (4) that expectations need be kept high that students can achieve understanding, and that without exception they be both encouraged and constrained to substantiate opinions, ideas, and hypotheses with evidence.”
Note the similarity to this discussion from a field as seemingly dissimilar as engineering:

“The first-year design course uses several noteworthy instructional methods including an emphasis on hands-on design activities, oral and written forms of communication, teamwork, in-class discussions, and solving ill-structured problems...These strategies may also help students move from a dualistic view of the world to one where they begin to see that situations must be viewed relative to their context. Exposing students to, coaching them into, and requiring them to participate in more open-ended discussions and problem-solving activities exposes them at minimum to multiple perspectives on issues and problems.” [Marra et al., (2000), p.44]

Each argues for more student-driven methods that encourage greater freedom, creativity, and risk taking. Most important for this paper, however, is the emphasis on the importance of covering subject matter involving ambiguity and multiple perspectives.

Unfortunately, as the readers of this journal understand, how economics is usually taught it not only inconsistent with this last point, it is downright antithetical, as Barone notes:

“Neoclassical economics is a hegemonic force within the discipline, limiting discourse and restricting the study of economics to a single perspective. Few other disciplines in the social sciences lack such theoretical diversity.” [Barone, (1991), p.16; emphasis added].

As we know, a central problem is that Neoclassicism teaches that economics is value-free and simply states the ‘facts’ regarding the way the world works. This contravenes the higher stages of Perry’s framework and is tantamount to the right/wrong world view of the dualistic stage (Butler, 2009). It is, as Lapidus writes, ‘seductive’ to our students and even to some of us [Lapidus, (2011), p.86].

Another central problem with neoclassicism is the implication that only one perspective exists and that all others have either been subsumed, ‘proven’ to be wrong, or ignored. This is not to say that one cannot help students move to higher stages of cognition within the confines of a mainstream economics course; there are, after all, disagreements and sub schools within that paradigm. But, the challenges are obvious; in fact, for educators within the pluralistic perspective, they are decisive – how can one possibly lead students to the realisation that multiple perspectives exist, contexts matter, and one’s own beliefs should be regularly reevaluated if we are simultaneously telling them that there is only one school of thought and it describes the way the world is?

And so the pluralist’s answer is to reject the positive-normative dichotomy (although teaching it as one of the beliefs of a particular school of thought) while explaining that there are many other living, viable schools of thought in economics. This returns us to a key issue addressed in this paper: “Does including strongly held minority views of economic processes (risk) undermining the entire venture?” Even sympathetic instructors might worry about confusing the student, which can lead to loss of confidence and a complete exit from economics. This may be especially problematic with first- and second-year students who are likely to be at the earliest of Perry’s stages.

In addition, even if students relish the opportunity to learn multiple perspectives, might they not simply inherit the professor’s biases? Pretending that the latter do not exist, that those of us who have devoted our lives to the study of economics have not formed opinions, is disingenuous and perhaps even dishonest. I, for example, find myself most attracted to Institutionalism and Post Keynesianism and, following Clarence Ayres’ (1952, pp.ix–x) advice, make no secret of this in the classroom. At the same time, I do
Student attitudes toward economic pluralism

my best to faithfully explain alternative views, continually emphasising that there is not a single school of thought from which I have not learned something useful; and because many people disagree with me, there is a good chance that I am wrong! But, at a subconscious level, it is doubtful that I will ever be able to deliver a lecture on Marx’s laws of capitalism in motion with the same enthusiasm and attention to detail as one about Keynes’ analysis of financial markets or Veblen’s pecuniary emulation. Thus, the question remains, am I, despite my professionalism and warnings to students, inadvertently swaying them?

4 Survey evidence

In the introduction to the IJPEE symposium, Garnett and Mearman (2011) lamented the dearth of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the pluralist method in the classroom. One reason is the inherent difficulty in evaluating and tracking a student’s cognitive development:

“Such limitations are particularly acute in evaluating pluralism, because its benefits may not be easily measurable over a short period. Developmental cognitive facets such as freedom of thought, creativity, and flexibility are not easily assessed or measured. Thus, exam scores or tests of understanding are unlikely to capture the effects of pluralist approaches.” [Garnett and Mearman, (2011), p.9]

Quite right, and with such caveats in mind I designed a survey for my students completing CPE at Texas Christian University (administered during Fall 2009 – Spring 2011).² It is important to understand what the survey can and cannot measure, which will be discussed below. In addition, in several instances a lack of observations meant that the results corresponding to some of the side issues were consistent with theory, but not statistically significant. This was not true, fortunately, of the main points being argued.

Our department is diverse in terms of economic schools of thought. A student taking intro and intermediate microeconomics, intro and intermediate macroeconomics, international trade, economic development, or economic history, is likely to encounter Institutionalism, New Institutionalism, Marxism, Post Keynesianism, Austrianism, and, of course, Neoclassicism. While this has caused deep rifts and dissension in other departments, we view it as strength and believe that it offers our students a unique experience. Ours is an undergraduate-only department housed in the liberal arts college and we take very seriously our teaching responsibilities; we view pluralism as complementary to our mission.

However, because to some extent our pluralism evolved by chance, there was no conscious programmatic recognition of the diversity of views, which was sometimes confusing to students.³ This was especially problematic when they were assigned to read scholarly publications, where such authors generally do not review the core premises of their school of thought, assuming widespread acceptance by readers. Students could therefore tell that something was different about the argument, but not always exactly what. For this reason, it was suggested at a faculty summer retreat that we create a course to provide a basic background for our students. This became CPE, listed in the Texas Christian University undergraduate bulletin as
“A survey of major theoretical approaches in economics today, with emphasis on the unique insights and applications of each approach, the theoretical underpinnings of enduring disagreements among professional economists, and the process of ongoing debate and cross-fertilization among these contending perspectives (TCU Undergraduate Catalog).”

This is a survey course for new students (though it may be taken later and often is). In terms of our overall curriculum, it is one of the foundational courses required of all majors (along with intermediate macroeconomics and microeconomics). A bachelor’s degree in economics at Texas Christian University cannot be earned without exposure to a range of contemporary paradigms.

The course, incidentally, is not a heterodox economics course; neoclassicism is introduced and covered along with other currently practised schools of thought. We offered the first sections in Fall 2007. Anecdotal evidence, along with the content of many of the free-response answers on our survey of graduating seniors, suggested that it quickly became an extremely popular course and that students appreciated that it represented a unique feature of their degree. I would, for those reasons, strongly recommend this course to other universities.

Table 1 indicates the demographics for the respondents from the three semesters. Of the 52 participants, most were 21 years of age, with almost twice as many older than younger – this is consistent with the fact that our students tend to ‘discover’ economics as a major relatively late. A little over one-fifth were female and while Conservative was the political identification selected by the largest number of students, this was still below 50% and was outnumbered by the sum of Independents and Liberals. Only six students (6) were educated outside the USA.

Table 1 Basic demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23+</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathetic</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-College Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
<td>88.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside United States</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Surveys conducted among students enrolled in my CPE at TCU during Fall 2009 – Spring 2011

Table 2 jumps right to the heart of the matter: student attitudes. Were they completely stupefied and driven off by being introduced to the wide range of views covered in contending perspectives, or did they find it invigorating? I tried to get at this attitude
question from a variety of directions. I decided, for example, that it was possible for a student to be more excited, but less confident. Furthermore, I thought that actively critiquing theory in other classes showed a stronger commitment. I also wondered what they thought of economics after the course. The results indicate that seven students did indeed feel less confident after than before; with one losing respect for the discipline. However, a loss of confidence alone is not necessarily a bad thing since it is natural when transitioning to a new stage; and in stark contrast, not a single individual reported being less excited about continuing their studies. In fact, over three-quarters reported being more enthusiastic and over 90% said they found themselves thinking more critically about theories taught in other courses. This is extremely encouraging and rebuts the fears of those who believe that pluralism may cause “teachers and their students [to] abandon economics entirely out of frustration born of confusion and uncertainty” [Siegfried and Meszaros, (1997), p.249].

### Table 2  
Attitudes towards economics as a discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has this class left you with a higher or lower opinion of the economics discipline in general?</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1 no response)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has this class left you more or less excited about learning and using economics?</td>
<td>More excited</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less excited</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3 no response)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has this class left you more or less confident of your own understanding of economics?</td>
<td>More confident</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less confident</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since taking this course, do you find yourself being more critical of theories learned in other courses (even if it’s only in your head)?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>90.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: All responses are significantly different from others at 10% (one-sample t-test) except: under “Has this class left you more or less confident of your own understanding of economics?” The difference between ’no change’ and ‘less confident’ is insignificant.

Source: Surveys conducted among students enrolled in my CPE at TCU during Fall 2009 – Spring 2011

It is important to note that we do not assume that those who declared more confidence had a stronger grasp of the material; they likely did, but this is only speculation and it is, at any rate, secondary to the goals of the paper. The survey measures attitudes, not aptitudes.

In order to understand where students were in Perry’s scheme, students were asked about their view of economics in general. Now that they had completed the course, did they believe that there was only one ‘right’ view (pure and modified dualism); that multiple ‘rights’ existed but these may depend on context (multiplicity/relativism); or that the pursuit of ‘right’ was futile (commitment)? Table 3 indicates how the responses were used to categorise students. Recall that within the context of the Perry scheme, the
hope is that by graduation, students will have at least abandoned dualism, if not advanced to commitment. By the end of my course, the overwhelming majority (88%) had, indeed, moved past simple ideas of right or wrong. Even if this class did not trigger this transition, at the very least it could have reinforced these feelings and helped in the process of transition. In fact, one in five had already moved on to commitment, while very few clung to dualism.

**Table 3** Epistemological approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which best describes your feeling about schools of thought in economics?</td>
<td>PURE DUALISM: There exists one right view and once we identify it we should not spend too much time studying the others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MODIFIED DUALISM: There exists one right view, but even if we have identified it we should still consider alternatives so that we will understand what is unique about the correct one</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MULTIPLICITY/RELATIVISM: One perspective could never be completely right because it depends too much on the questions we are trying to answer; one school of thought’s analysis may fit one problem, and another’s a different problem</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COMMITMENT: There is no way for us to know whether there is one right view or not; consequently, we have to constantly consider alternatives</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OTHER, please specify</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All responses are significantly different from others at 10% except: ‘PURE DUALISM’ is not statistically different from ‘MODIFIED DUALISM’ or ‘OTHER’.

Source: Surveys conducted among students enrolled in my CPE at TCU during Fall 2009 – Spring 2011

This begs the question of what sort of student fell into each category, which is addressed in Table 4. Note first that pure dualism and dualism were combined to give a broader base for that set and the ambiguous ‘other’ response was dropped. Glancing at the first row, it appears that those on the commitment end of the spectrum tended to be slightly (while statistically insignificant) older than those still at dualism, which is consistent with Perry. It is also interesting that none of the eleven female students selected dualism (their highest percentage was in commitment), supporting the idea that women tend to mature faster than men. It is also possible that this results from the masculine bias of neoclassical economics levied by Feminist Economics. Also not surprising is that students from a different culture were not attracted to dualism: not a single foreign-educated student chose it. The last background question concerned the individual’s politics. Dualists were either conservative or independent, but not liberal or
Student attitudes toward economic pluralism

279

apathetic. The latter two became much more important (at a statistically significant level) under multiplicity/relativism and commitment.

Table 4 Demographics by epistemological approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Dualism</th>
<th>Multiplicity/relativism</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age*</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender by % female</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education by % non-US</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathetic</td>
<td>A: 0%</td>
<td>A: 3%</td>
<td>A: 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>C: 60%</td>
<td>C: 43%</td>
<td>C: 36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>I: 40%</td>
<td>I: 29%</td>
<td>I: 27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>L: 0%</td>
<td>L: 26%</td>
<td>L: 27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The capitalised titles in the heading row indicate progressive steps along Perry’s scheme. *Under average age, those who selected 23+ were counted as 23.

All responses are significantly different at 10% except: none of the ‘average age’ values is significantly different from the other; under ‘gender’ by % female, the difference between 23% and 27% is insignificant; under ‘politics’ and ‘DUALISM’, the differences between 0% and 40% and 40% and 60% are insignificant; under ‘politics’ and ‘MULTIPLICITY/RELATIVISM’, the differences between 43% and 29%, 43% and 26%, and 29% and 26% are insignificant; under ‘politics’ and ‘COMMITMENT’, there was no significant difference among any of the values; under ‘politics’ and ‘apathetic’, the differences between 0% and 3% and 3% and 9% are insignificant; under ‘politics’ and ‘conservative’, the differences between 60% and 43% and 43% and 36% are insignificant; under ‘politics’ and ‘independent’, there was no significant difference among any of the values; and under ‘politics’ and ‘liberal’, the difference between 26% and 28% is insignificant.

Source: Surveys conducted among students enrolled in my CPE at TCU during Fall 2009 – Spring 2011

Table 5 illustrates student attitudes by stage of learning, thereby returning us to a key question of the paper: does a pluralistic approach reduce students’ confidence and opinions of economics, driving them away to other studies? It was already shown that this was generally not true and these data offers further support. Before proceeding, however, note that these questions are in some ways problematic since they ask about changes rather than levels. This means that someone could be less confident than when they started for example, and yet still have the highest overall level of confidence in the entire class.

To re-emphasise a crucial point: not a single person was less excited about learning economics, with almost 80% more excited. Interestingly, those with the biggest increase in enthusiasm were the dualists (although, because of the small number of observations, this was not significant at 10%), while the lowest were those at commitment. It is possible, however, that those in the latter category had started from a higher level, but what is actually most striking is the fact that even those least immediately affected by the course (in terms of Perry’s scheme) were eager for more. In other words, the students most likely to be disappointed by the pluralistic approach actually found it intriguing
(even if they had not as yet learned the main lessons). This is very powerful evidence. Furthermore, not one student included lost respect for economics as a consequence of the course. There was a general tendency for those past Dualism to have the biggest increase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Attitudes towards economics as a discipline by epistemological approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dualism (5 obs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excited about learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>H: 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td>N: 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>L: 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion of economics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>H: 80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Change</td>
<td>N: 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>L: 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Confident</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>H: 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Change</td>
<td>N: 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>L: 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More critical of theory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Y: 60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>N: 40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The capitalised titles in the heading row indicate progressive steps along Perry’s scheme.
All responses are significantly different at 10% except: under ‘opinion of economics’ and ‘DUALISM’, the difference between 80% and 20% is insignificant; under ‘More Critical of Theory’ and ‘DUALISM’, the difference between 60% and 40% is insignificant; and under ‘Excited about Learning’ and ‘COMMITMENT’, the difference between 70% and 30% is insignificant.

Source: Surveys conducted among students enrolled in my CPE at TCU during Fall 2009 – Spring 2011

The responses to, “Has this class left you more or less confident of your own understanding of economics?” were also very interesting. No one under dualism or at the level of commitment experienced a regression, but one in five of the largest group, multiplicity/relativism, did. Why? Possibly these individuals are at a cross roads: accepting that different viewpoints exist, they have not necessarily decided how to deal with this. They are precisely whom we would expect to see struggle, and their consequent intellectual anxiety will hopefully be the catalyst for the necessary introspection and reflection for advancement to commitment [Perry, (1981), p.108]. They were also, according to the last question on Table 5, most likely to be more critical of lectures in their other classes. Dualists, not surprisingly, were the least likely.

The last set of questions (Table 6) asked about specific paradigms. In terms of how many schools of thought students assumed existed before the course began, although there was not a statistically significant difference between any of the numbers (at 10%); there was nevertheless a slight increase from dualism (3.4) to multiplicity/relativism (3.7)
Student attitudes toward economic pluralism

to commitment (4.1). There was no discernable pattern, however, with respect to which
paradigms. The most common responses overall were neoclassical, Marxist, and post
Keynesian. Dualists were the most likely to believe that neoclassicism was the only view
prior to CPE.

Table 6  Pre-class awareness and post-class openness by epistemological approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dualism (5 obs)</th>
<th>Multiplicity/relativism (35 obs)</th>
<th>Commitment (11 obs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avg. number of schools of thought existed before course</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought only neoclassicism existed before course</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. number of schools of thought would consult</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: None of the values are statistically significant at 10%.

Source: Surveys conducted among students enrolled in my CPE at TCU during Fall 2009 – Spring 2011

My results indicate that the fear that students may be confused, depressed, or driven off
by pluralism is ill-founded; quite the contrary, even those at the earliest stages of Perry’s
scheme are enthusiastic and confident. Despite students still coming to terms with how
they think the process operates, they have no problem with the idea that even experts are
unsure and that controversies go quite deep in economics. Students enjoy learning
because it is exciting. Most significantly, the group within which there was the biggest
jump in confusion was also the one with the highest increased respect for economics (95%).
Gilles Raveaud (2009, p.255) writes:

“I think that introductory economics should start with the premises that we the
teachers do not know—and that we have no failsafe recipes to offer. The
argument is often made that you cannot afford to do this because this is an
introductory class, and that if you do so, you are going to deter the students
from your discipline or, at the very least, puzzle them. But I would argue that
students need to be challenged, and that they can be challenged from the very
beginning, because this is when their minds are the most flexible, when they
are more open to disconcerting views. Also, while students need to be
reassured that their professors know better than they do, they also like to be
puzzled. Our role as teachers is not to give them ready-made answers. It is to
provide them with the tools and opportunities they need in order to learn to
think for themselves about the relative value of competing economic ideas,
institutions, and policies in the face of genuine uncertainty about which one is
‘right’.”

Raveaud believes that students enjoy controversy that learning the Austrian action-axiom
in the same course that explains Marxist exploitation theory is far more exciting than
confusing.

It was recognised as a possibility that students may be drawn to the perspective
preferred by their instructor. Based on the final question from Table 6, the evidence is
certainly suggestive. Students were asked to respond to the following:
“Say you were assigned to do a research project next semester (or at a future job) and the instructor (or your supervisor) didn’t care from what school of thought you approached it. Assuming that you were equally comfortable with each approach (i.e., that you didn’t make your choice simply on the basis of knowing one school of thought much better than the others), whose research would you seriously consider examining? Please check all that apply.”

The choices were neoclassical, Marxist, Austrian, Post Keynesian, Institutionalist, New Institutionalist, Feminist, and Monetarist. There are two intrinsic problems with this question: one, despite the question’s instructions not to be concerned about how well a student knows an approach, the answer will be biased; and two, the subject of the research project would make a huge difference (I was afraid to suggest anything specific for fear of hopelessly prejudicing the answers). Looking at the results, they are very similar, so much so that they are not statistically significant. However, taking the numbers as face value, Dualists were likely to consult more schools of thought than any other group! While this is clearly inconsistent with the general thrust of the paper, a possibility suggests itself below.

Table 7  
Schools of thought consulted by epistemological approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Neoclassical</th>
<th>Austrian</th>
<th>Marxist</th>
<th>Post Keynesian</th>
<th>Institutional</th>
<th>New inst</th>
<th>Feminist</th>
<th>Monetarist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dualist (5 obs.)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi/relat (35 obs)</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commit (11 obs)</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students (51 obs)</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: All responses were significantly different at 10% except: under ‘neoclassical’ none of the values were statistically different; under ‘Austrian’, the difference between 40% and 23% is insignificant; under ‘Marxist’, the difference between 20% and 18% is insignificant; under ‘Post Keynes’, none of the values were statistically different; under ‘Institutional’, the difference between 20% and 27% is insignificant; under ‘New Inst’, none of the values were statistically different; and under ‘Feminist’, the differences between 0% and 3% and 3% and 9% are insignificant.

Source: Surveys conducted among students enrolled in my CPE at TCU during Fall 2009 – Spring 2011

Table 7 delineates the schools of thought students would consider consulting. Most noteworthy is the number attracted to Post Keynesianism. I can only assume that the causal factor here is that I come from that tradition. I am therefore much more familiar with the literature, arguments, history, personalities, etc. and consequently offer much more colourful, extensive, and complete lectures on the subject. And although I try to explain every school of thought as if I believed it, evidently this may not have been successful.

This does not mean that we should simply accept this as an unavoidable fact. Indeed, this is a red flag to me and something that must be addressed. Detractors who fear that such infection may take place are, at least based on my course, quite possibly right.
Student attitudes toward economic pluralism

(assuming students were not simply trying to please their teacher). If I am to be intellectually honest, I owe it to my students to develop a more comprehensive set of notes and readings for those schools of thought with which I am least familiar (particularly Austrian, New Institutionalist, and Feminist). Team teaching the course might be another means of avoiding this problem.

The other noteworthy factor in Table 7 is that distinct patterns exist in most of the columns. While neoclassicism rises slightly from dualism to multiplicity/relativism to Commitment, the Post Keynesian and especially Institutionalist and Feminist ones do so much more markedly. Meanwhile, precisely the opposite pattern emerges with Austrianism, New Institutionalism, and Monetarism. In general and with the exception of Neoclassicism (where the pattern was, at any rate, the weakest) there was a tendency for those at the dualistic stage to prefer paradigms more consistent with a right/wrong worldview. Meanwhile, approaches that argue for a more holistic, interdisciplinary analysis and whose conclusions tend to be more open-ended were most popular with those at the commitment stage. Hence, the strange result that dualists were actually willing to examine more paradigms may simply be a function of the specific schools of thought covered. Of the eight choices, three – neoclassicism, Austrianism, and Monetarism – are rooted in traditions that lean towards the worldview already accepted by dualists. This suggests that while students at higher levels of cognitive development may not choose to consult more paradigms, they select different ones. It also suggests that the choice of schools of thought to be covered in a course is important. If the subset is too narrow, it could serve to reinforce Dualism rather than help students move away.

5 Conclusions

A core premise of this paper is that a pluralistic approach to economics is more likely to help students advance to the Commitment stage of Perry’s scheme. The surveys that formed the core of this study were undertaken to answer two related questions: One, does a pluralistic approach confuse and disillusion students? And two, do students have a tendency to adopt their instructor’s biases? Based on the survey results, the answer to the first appears to be no. Instead, students are enthused and confident when they exit CPE, even those still at the Dualistic stage. Furthermore, not a single person was less excited about learning economics, with almost 80% more excited. If an instructor is avoiding teaching other schools of thought for fear of driving them off, these results suggest reconsideration. While it is of course impossible to know if students merely said what they thought they should say, or if those respondents who were older were just already further along Perry’s scheme, there is nevertheless considerable evidence that the integration of economic pluralism into the curriculum facilitate students’ ascension to higher stages of cognitive development.

On the other hand, there is evidence that students assimilate the instructor’s perspective. It is possible that this is a temporary condition as they move through higher stages of development. Even so, the teacher should nevertheless remain vigilant. One must take pains, for example, to present each school of thought as an outsider, avoid the word ‘we’ when discussing the favoured approach, and not overload the reading and lecture in a way that would bias the students’ views. Furthermore, the range of schools of thought covered is an important consideration. Going from Neoclassicism to Monetarism
is not very dramatic, unlike Austrianism to Institutionalism. Students need to be confronted with wide divergences if the necessary challenge is to be created.

All in all, the survey results make a strong case for the expansion of pluralistic teaching in economics to help our students become sophisticated thinkers and lifelong learners. They are very enthusiastic about it, to the point that there is no more common response to “What do you see as the greatest strengths of our program?” on our graduating senior survey than “you taught us different schools of thought”. We should take advantage of this natural eagerness to build a curriculum that will make them better economists and better citizens.

This paper focused on discerning students’ attitudes and not aptitudes. Further research on attitudes is welcome, as is research analysing the concrete effect of those perceptions on learning. Does higher confidence or movement along the stages of Perry’s scheme truly translate into increased understanding of what comprises a paradigm? Are such individuals better able to identify the core elements of Marxism and Austrianism, distinguish between them, and use logic, reason, and context to decide which applies? Such a study would be fascinating and extremely helpful to those of us pursuing economic pluralism in the classroom. This would involve both surveys (as conducted in this paper) and classroom assignments and would require that the researcher be able to see which student test grade (for example) corresponded to each survey. Careful pre-planning would be necessary, but we could learn a great deal from such research. This research would also benefit simply from more data: the paucity students in the Dualism and Commitment stages definitely handicapped statistical tests of significance.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the two anonymous referees and the editor for their substantial help in improving the paper.

References


Student attitudes toward economic pluralism


Notes

1 The terms paradigm and school of thought are used interchangeably.
2 Response rates were: Fall 2009, 11/24; Fall, 2010, 22/28; and Spring 2011, 19/22.
3 Our ‘accidental pluralism’ was a result of the ideological diversity of the hiring of our older faculty who were mostly Institutionalists, out of the Texas and Oklahoma traditions; and were open to colleagues from various paradigmatic approaches. Once they retired, we realised that we had scholars from a wide range of views. Fortunately, another emphasis in our department has been attracting collegial individuals, which is why we saw this as an opportunity rather than a problem. Another key factor is that we do not employ a journal-ranking system in our tenure and promotion guidelines that places one school of thought over another – very important in faculty development.
4 The complete list for my course is neoclassicism, Marxism, Austrianism, Post Keynesianism, Institutionalism, New Institutionalism, and Feminism. Monetarism is discussed and placed within the neoclassical during the Post Keynesian lectures. Two instructors currently teach this course, and the surveys were conducted only in my sections.
5 Although distinct, I did not design the questionnaire to neatly distinguish between the two because I was far more interested in the extreme ends of the continuum.
6 There were two ‘other’ responses. One was very clearly pure dualism and I recorded it as such (for their explanation of ‘other’ they used the precise wording of the structured option that was already available and which corresponded to pure dualism). The other said, “they need to be locked in a room until they can all collectively come together and use their own individual methods that best explain each individual question.” I could find no logical way to categorise this since it had elements of both dualism (in the sense that they needed to get together to agree on a common view) and multiplicity/relativism (the respondent assumed that their consensus would be based on each model working in a particular context).
7 Or at least they thought they should say this given that they were in a class on contending perspectives! There is, of course, no way to know for sure.
8 That was, incidentally, the lone individual who had a lower opinion of economics.
9 It is impossible to know whether this was due to the pluralistic approach of the course or that older students are more mature. Fortunately, determining this is not critical to the aims of this study (although it is obviously an interesting question).
Recall from above that there was a single individual whose response to the question designed
to classify them by Perry scheme was too ambiguous to be useful. They were dropped from
the rest of the study and happened to be the lone respondent to indicate that they had lost
respect for economics.

I base my course around study questions that the students answer and then use to prepare for
the exam. The total number associated with explanations of the various schools of thought is
81. With seven major paradigms covered, this implies (ceteris paribus) around 11 each. In fact,
22 are devoted to Post Keynesianism.

The order may make a difference, but I have not experimented with this. As it is, I start with
neoclassicism because I want to explain the overall structure of economics. After that, I try to
alternate political perspectives so that students are constantly faced with contrasts. However,
there is no a priori reason to believe that this is the most effective method.

Of course, if the students have been adequately prepared to critically analyse contending
perspectives, this may not be a problem at all, or at least only a temporary one.

Appendix

Contending perspectives in economics

Page 1 – Question 1 – Choice – One Answer (Bullets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your age?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>○ 17 or younger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ 23 or older</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Page 1 – Question 2 – Choice – One Answer (Bullets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your gender?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>○ Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Page 1 – Question 3 – Choice – One Answer (Bullets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you describe yourself politically?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>○ Conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Apathetic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Page 1 – Question 4 – Choice – One Answer (Bullets)

Where did you receive most of your pre-college education?

- United States
- Outside of the United States

Page 1 – Question 5 – Choice – One Answer (Bullets)

What grade did you earn on the last exam you took in this class?

- A
- B
- C
- D
- F

Page 1 – Question 6 – Choice – Multiple Answers (Bullets)

Before the semester started, were you aware that the following schools of thought existed today and had active participants, journals, conferences, et cetera?

Please check all for which your answer would be 'yes'.

- Neoclassical (mainstream)
- Austrian
- Marxist
- Post Keynesian
- Institutionalist
- New Institutionalist
- Feminist
- Monetarist
Say you were assigned to do a research project next semester (or at a future job) and the instructor (or your supervisor) didn’t care from what school of thought you approached it. Assuming that you were equally comfortable with each approach (i.e., that you didn’t make your choice simply on the basis of knowing one school of thought much better than the others), whose research would you seriously consider examining?

Please check all that apply.

- Neoclassical (mainstream)
- Austrian
- Marxist
- Post Keynesian
- Institutionalist
- New Institutionalist
- Feminist
- Monetarist

Before the semester started, did you think that what we called Neoclassical economics was the only school of thought still practised in our discipline?

- Yes
- No

Has this class left you with a higher or lower opinion of the economics discipline in general?

- Higher
- No change
- Lower

Has this class left you more or less excited about learning and using economics?

- More excited
- No change
- Less excited
Page 1 – Question 11 – Choice – One Answer (Bullets)

Has this class left you more or less confident of your own understanding of economics?

- More confident
- No change
- Less confident

Page 1 – Question 12 – Choice – One Answer (Bullets)

Since taking this course, do you find yourself being more critical of theories learned in other courses (even if it’s only in your head)?

- Yes
- No

Page 1 – Question 13 – Choice – One Answer (Bullets)

Which best describes your feeling about schools of thought in economics (NOTE: the different colours are only to help you differentiate one potential answer from another--the program kind of crammed them together!)?

- There exists one right view and once we identify it we should not spend too much time studying the others.
- There exists one right view, but even if we have identified it we should still consider alternatives so that we will understand what is unique about the correct one.
- One perspective could never be completely right because it depends too much on the questions we are trying to answer; one school of thought’s analysis may fit one problem, and another’s a different problem.
- There is no way for us to know whether there is one right view or not; consequently, we have to constantly consider alternatives.
- Other, please specify:

Page 1 – Question 14 – Choice – One Answer (Bullets)

Because of excess demand, we’ve had to limit enrollment in this class almost exclusively to seniors. Our original goal, however, was to have new majors take it right away. When do you think students should take this class?

- As one of their first economics classes
- Somewhere in the middle of their econ course work
- As one of their last economics classes
- I don’t think it really matters
Everyone forgets most of the details from classes they take. They may, however, retain a few lessons or themes. Five years from now, what do you think you’ll be most likely to remember from this class?
Please take a moment to consider this and record your answer below.

If you have any additional thoughts about the course that you’d like to share, please type them below: