Contending economic perspectives at a liberal arts college: a 25-year retrospective

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Abstract: In 1985 the Department of Economics at Dickinson College USA, a private four year liberal arts college, embarked upon a bold but promising reform of its economics programme placing it on the cutting edge of what is now called ‘pluralist economics education’. This new approach to the philosophy of economics education was and is called ‘contending economic perspectives’. My article ‘Contending perspectives: curricular reform in economics’ published in the Journal of Economics Education (1991) argued for the inclusion of heterodox economic theories and articulated the benefits of the Dickinson contending perspectives programme. After 25 years experience with this programme what have our students learned and what have we learned from this experience? In the face of the new (or renewed) worldwide discussions of a ‘new’ pluralist economics in the wake of the post-autistic movement started by French students in 2000, is the ‘contending perspectives’ model still consistent with the current ideals of pluralist economics education? This paper argues that the answer to that question is a qualified yes.

Keywords: contending economic perspectives; instrumentalist educational philosophy; liberal arts educational philosophy; pluralism; curricular reform; paradigms; neoclassical economics; NCE; heterodox economics; monistic; institutional economics; feminist economics; radical political economy; RPE; Marxist economics.


Biographical notes: Chuck Barone is a Professor of Economics and American Studies at Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA. He has published articles and books from a radical perspective on development, imperialism, economics education, and race, class, and gender. His most recent book Radical Political Economy: A Concise Introduction serves as a primer on radical economics. He teaches disciplinary and interdisciplinary courses on contending economics perspectives, American capitalism, and race, class, and gender.
College (USA) with a then five-year-old dramatically different economics curriculum that we called ‘contending perspectives’. We toyed with the idea of calling it ‘alternative perspectives’ but decided that ‘contending’ better captured what we wanted to accomplish and that was dialogue, lively conversation and the exchange of ideas in the best tradition of a liberal arts education. Although many may find their departmental and institutional situation very different from ours at Dickinson College and may not have the kind of institutional support and departmental faculty willingness to change that we have had, I think there is still much that can be learned from our experience that can help to inform others in their efforts to build pluralist economic programmes.

Our efforts to reform the economics curriculum in the 1980s can be viewed as the product of the successive waves of heterodox economists to enter US colleges and universities. With the repression of heterodox economics after World War Two, neoclassical economics (NCE) reigned supreme and was not challenged until the 1960s and 1970s. A small number of economists who were mostly products of mainstream PhD programmes, along with a few who were influenced by institutional and Austrian thought, were able to land academic positions in the 1960s and early 1970s (Lee, 2009). Many re-educated themselves in non-mainstream economic theories in the context of the political and social protest movements that rocked colleges and universities in the US and elsewhere. There was little programmatic change in undergraduate economics education during the period; however, alternative perspectives were offered in existing mainstream courses and elective courses in heterodox economics were introduced at a small number of colleges and universities.

Instrumental at this time, however, was the creation of graduate economic programmes in the USA, where students had for the first time the opportunity to study heterodox economic theories at schools such as The American University in Washington, D.C. where the first US PhD programme in political economy was created in 1972. Other graduate programmes were also developed at the University of California at Riverside, the New School for Social Research in New York City, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Other universities also had a small cadre of heterodox economists where graduate students were able to get some exposure to heterodox economics. Graduates of these programmes in small but significant numbers entered academia during the late 1970s and 1980s; and they, like me, constitute a ‘third wave’ of those trying to carve out a space for heterodoxy within the discipline of economics. This in turn created more but limited spaces for subsequent generations of heterodox graduates.

As an early member of the third wave in 1975 (a graduate of The American University in Washington, D.C.), I became one of two heterodox faculty in economics at Dickinson College where a liberal education included a strong commitment to the diversity of thought within disciplines. For the first ten years I was quite content to integrate (where possible) alternative economic perspectives into existing mainstream theory and topics courses and to teach a course on Radical Political Economy (RPE). In the context of the vast majority of colleges and universities this was a considerable advance. However, overtime I grew dissatisfied with the fact that our economics majors were only required to learn mainstream theory and only those students who elected to take courses from me were exposed to any alternative economics. This was the impetus for my challenge to the existing economics major curriculum and subsequent efforts to transform it into a more inclusive (pluralistic) programme that came to be called ‘contending economic perspectives’. I had the strong support of the Dean of the College.
and I was joined in 1985 by Gordon Bergsten, an institutionalist, who was hired to help design this innovative new programme. At other colleges and universities changes were being made as well.

As we entered the 21st century the gains of the heterodoxy still represented no more than a toe-hold even after many subsequent waves of heterodox economists who built on and consolidated existing programmes and the discipline of economics as a whole remained overwhelmingly monotheistically dominated by NCE. Heterodox calls and hopes for greater openness and conversation with orthodox economists failed to materialise despite the great efforts of people like Deidre McCloskey, Arjo Klamer and others (McCloskey, 1985; McCloskey et al., 1991; Klamer et al., 1988) Instead of the hoped for (progressive) advance of economics, it retreated to neoliberalism and the formation of a neoliberal world order. In short, heterodoxy continued to be repressed, marginalized and ghettoised.

However, the turn of the century marked a turning point in the movement for greater heterodoxy and we now find ourselves in an historical period characterised by yet a new wave that is a part of a world-wide movement for pluralism in economics (pluralist economics). The catalyst for this new wave was the 2000 strike by French economics students and their petition against the narrowness of mainstream economics which they labelled ‘autism’. This movement, while small, spread quickly among students and faculty around the world (facilitated by the internet) and generated a movement for ‘post-autistic’ economics (Post-Autistic Economics Network). The result was a re-energised heterodoxy that prompted (once again) lively debates and an extensive and very impressive literature including new journals and international associations on a (re)vision of the discipline of economics that would be characterised by pluralism. It is perhaps not coincidental that this historical moment, in a world dominated by neoliberalism, is also characterised by an assault on heterodoxy, at least in US colleges and universities, with the loss of programmes at University of Notre Dame and New York University; and pressures to retrench at other universities and colleges such as the New School for Social Research. Similar struggles have been ongoing in Australia and England; and in fact much of the recent literature on pluralist economics has been framed in response to an official 2006 UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education review of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Economics (SBSE) which attempts to regulate the content of undergraduate economic education in the UK (Freeman, 2007, 2009).

2 Programme

Although the Dickinson College programme is long running, little has changed. The centrepiece of the programme is a required 200-level course ‘contending economic perspectives’ which is really a more introductory than intermediate level course but is so listed because it is taught comparatively with NCE. My initial intent was limited to just making RPE a required course; however, we quickly became advocates of more inclusiveness (pluralism) to include other heterodox perspectives including Austrian, ecological, old institutional, and post-Keynesian economics in addition to RPE. It was also clear to us that there was no single truth but multiple truths and vantage points, something worthwhile to be gained from the study of each theoretical perspective.
Although we called our approach to economics education ‘contending perspectives’, it is consistent with today’s emerging philosophy of pluralist economics.

A series of summer faculty seminars taught by notable members of these schools of thought were funded by the College and brought the faculty up to at least a minimal level of familiarity, although only two of us, Gordon Bergsten and I, would actually develop and teach the required contending perspectives course. Five perspectives in one semester was quite a daunting task. When the experience of doing minimal justice to PKE proved too challenging given the time constraints of this course, and our own lack of preparation in PKE, it was later dropped and replaced by feminist economics once it became established as one of the main contenders.

In addition, there was a departmental ‘social contract’ that required three weeks of economic history and thought in each of introductory micro and macro economics courses. This ‘social contract’ also required topics courses at the 200 and 300 level to include at least two different perspectives in courses where it was relevant to do so. It also required a senior seminar that was to be a capstone course that brought together contending perspectives within a specific topical focus.

In order to reach a departmental agreement on these changes, we had to agree to a more rigorous required programme of mainstream economics education both at the introductory level with a traditional two semester sequence and with calculus-based intermediate level micro and macro theory courses. Majors were required to take courses offered by the mathematics department in statistics and differential calculus. Although some might see this compromise as a Faustian bargain with the devil, what we got in return represented a huge step forward in undergraduate economics education and majors were required to at least learn some heterodox economics (for information about us visit our homepage: http://www.dickinson.edu/academics/programs/economics/).

3 Evaluating our programme

Unfortunately, we have not done any formal surveys of present or former students, although the present author has just begun a major study that will use quantitative and qualitative methods (exit/entry surveys, general surveys, interviews, and focus groups). Also the college has only just recently required outcomes assessment and our department is just now beginning to develop and put these in place. This makes it challenging to provide good hard evidence of what we are accomplishing and whether we are achieving our objectives.

However, our economic programme has been evaluated twice in the last twenty years by outside reviewers – part of our required decennial review process. In both cases our reviewers were established and notable pluralist economists; and both reviews were very positive. The reviewers were impressed with the distinctiveness and effectiveness of our pluralist economics programme based on interviews with students, faculty, and other departments and officials on campus. They commented on our students’ excitement and enthusiasm for studying economics from contending perspectives, and found that the required course contending economics perspectives was often the student’s favourite course. They also commented favourably on our ability to both provide our students with a rigorous calculus and statistics-based programme of NCE while also grounding students in several heterodox schools of thought:
“One of the major strengths of the economics programs at Dickinson is that it adds a distinctive element to its sequence of required courses: the Contending Perspectives course. This enables the Dickinson faculty …to show their students that economics, as a discipline, remains an evolving subject matter, one contextually-based, with competing foundational perspectives. The course accomplishes an ambitious goal”.

Regarding its more standard requirements, [we] found evidence of a strong programmatic core as well as sound curricular links between entry level courses (ECON 111 and 112) and intermediate theory courses (ECON 268 and 278). The requirement of Calculus I means that the intermediate micro theory course can be taught at a relatively ambitious level of sophistication (External Reviewers Report, Economics Department, Dickinson College, 14th March 2006).

Beyond this, however, we are left with anecdotal evidence based on our many years of experience in this programme: our experiences in the classroom; countless informal discussions with students after class and during office visits; requests for and supervising independent studies and honours projects; informal contacts with our alumni; and our interdisciplinary work with faculty in other disciplines. What follows is drawn from this anecdotal evidence.

4 What have our students learned?

The question is, at this historical juncture, what we can learn from the past 25 years of ‘contending perspectives’ at Dickinson College and more importantly what have our students learned? The answers to the latter will be divided into the more general lessons students have learned from a contending perspectives approach to economics education and the more instrumental learning associated with particular economic perspectives:

- Many of our students (dependent upon who they learned their traditional micro and macro theory from) realise that what they had previously learned as ‘economics’ is in fact a particular school of economics called neo-classical economics even though most texts rarely if ever reference it by name and pass it off as just ‘economics’ as if there were nothing else.

- All of our students have learned that there are multiplicities of economic perspectives beyond traditional economics that have important and useful insights into human economic affairs. Students as a result also have a deeper and more critical understanding of mainstream economics and analysis, insights that flow from the comparative educational gains of contrasting perspectives. Some have found a passion for a particular heterodox perspective and taken at least one other course or an independent reading/study on that perspective. A few have gone on to do graduate work at universities with pluralist economic programmes and a few have also gone on to mainstream programmes.

- They have learned that different theories are both a way of seeing and understanding some problems and ways of not seeing others, and that different theories shed light of different intensity depending upon the topic. When perspectives are complementary they enhance our students’ ability to see the greater complexity of real world economy (‘broadband economics’) in contrast to the narrowness of traditional approaches (‘narrowband economics’). Students are also able to see the
interdisciplinary nature of all human phenomena – an open system where there are multiple truths as opposed to a closed and restricted one. They have learned that insights from sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, women’s/gender studies and psychology are important to a complete understanding of economic affairs and that economics is a social science rather than a branch of natural science.

- Our students have found that where competing explanations of the same phenomena exist that some kind of convincing argument or evidence is required to sort out the disagreements and that this may not always be easy or even possible. As a result students have a better understanding of the ongoing/contestable nature of knowledge. They become better at thinking about how economists justify arguments – through plausible theory and/or strong evidence.

- They also develop an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and their implicit assumptions and that many commonly held economic beliefs are unsupported assertions that have been elevated to the status of dogma. They become better at questioning, thinking about and even challenging what they are being taught in other classes because they know that it’s not a truth that all economists accept. This adds a level of excitement and debate to the study of economics, an intellectual contested terrain.

- Students have also learned that while mathematics and mathematical modeling have an important place in economics that story telling, narrative, and other more qualitative approaches are equally important to a complete understanding of the human economy.

- Our students have learned the importance of values and ethical issues in economics, and that economic choices have moral and ethical dimensions. They have also learned that all economic perspectives or theories including NCE are value laden and that it is important to identify those values and make them an explicit part of economic theorising. They have learned that all social scientists including economists bring to their work pre-analytic visions which limit their ideas and thinking, and these predispositions are rooted in history, society, cultural, biography and personal likes and dislikes. Understanding this context is essential to a deeper understanding of economic ideas, ideologies and their limitations.

- They have learned to see that human behaviour is determined not just by individual human agency but heavily influenced by social structures including culture, and that understanding institutions is crucial to understanding these structures and the ways societies organise the production and distribution of goods and services both in the present and in the past.

- Our students have learned that economic history and the history of economic thought are important dimensions of the study of economics as a discipline and economic issues. They have developed the ability to enter into the dialogues and debates among economic thinkers, and between economists and others, and to discover one’s own standpoint within these economic conversations and debates.

- Students have developed a better understanding of self and others through an expansion of the scope of economic research to include those whose experiences are
typically omitted, such as women, working people, people of colour, and non-Western peoples.

- They have learned that there are many different criteria that can be used to evaluate economic systems, performance, and policy that go beyond the neoclassically defined criterion of economic efficiency that include more inclusive definitions of efficiency as well as the quality of life, equality, liberty and democracy as the final goals of an economic system as opposed to the intermediate goal of efficiency. They have learned critical insights into the nature of our economic system and the global economy that go well beyond traditional market failure arguments. They have learned to question whether the present economic system is compatible with social justice and to think from different perspectives about what a just world might look like.

Some of the more paradigmatic or perhaps instrumental lessons students have learned:

- They have learned the full range of traditional economic concepts, theory and analysis and its application in at least some policy areas. They have learned and used mathematical statistics and differential calculus. They have learnt at least at some rudimentary level, some heterodox economic theories including radical, Marxist, institutional, Austrian, feminist, and ecological economics.

1 From institutional economics:

a Students have learned that markets are complex economic, social, political, and cultural institutions, and that in pre-industrial societies market behaviour was strictly limited and circumscribed (embedded) so as to not contaminate these societies with notions of avarice and self-gain and that in industrial societies market exchange is unleashed (disembedded) by state intervention (force) and legitimated by the ideology of the ‘free market’ by classical political economy (fraud). They have learned that the institution of the ‘free market’ has been contested by historically-based dual movements for regulation and protection on the one hand, and greater reign of free and unrestricted markets on the other which in part explain the historical evolution of industrial societies.

b They learned that a key to understanding modern industrial societies is understanding the corporation and its dominant role in shaping and determining both the economy and society. Students learned that corporations as institutions have instrumental and invidious tendencies. They have studied the technological imperative, economies of scale and scope, mergers and the importance of intra and inter-corporate planning in industrial economies. They have learned that, in corporate capitalism, big business is the government and corporations are planners thereby challenging the misleading dichotomies such as free markets versus government intervention and market forces versus planning. Students have also taken a look at the invidious nature of the corporation based on managing for power and profit rather than productivity, the harmful effects of corporate bureaucracy on personality development and morals as well as the corporation’s hegemony over other society institutions including government, family, education, and religion.
They have also studied the institutionalist ideas for reforming economic institutions to adjust them more perfectly to human needs. The goals go well beyond efficiency and expanded output to include life sustenance, self-esteem and fellowship, and freedoms for consumers, workers, and citizens. Students have explored Institutionalist proposals for democratic national planning or industrial policies; full employment and incomes policies; meeting basic human needs; power sharing within corporations; and the development of mediating non-economic institutions to protect against corporate hegemony.

From the Austrian economics:

a Students have learned praxeology the study of human action, the subjective nature of knowledge, and that there is an inherent unpredictability and indeterminacy in human knowledge making the future difficult if not impossible to predict. They have learned a very different view of markets, that they represent a creative process for the discovery and articulation of knowledge – a process through which individuals can coordinate their individual plans minimising the amount of knowledge individuals need in the face of absolute uncertainty. They have learned the important role of entrepreneurship that drives the market process and fills the gap between present knowledge and future coordination.

b They have learned that institutions such as the market have evolved spontaneously through individual human action and not conscious design. Institutions such as laws, money, and government are part of spontaneous social orders.

c They have also learned that the 'knowledge problem' makes government planning an inefficient alternative to the market process and they have studied the various Austrian proposals for a strict limitation on the role of government based on the libertarian belief that only with the voluntary and unrestricted actions of individuals and the unconstrained market process will people be free to determine their own path to a prosperous life.

From radical and Marxist economics:

a Students have learned that there is a command or vertical dimension to economic relationships, not just the traditional level playing field of voluntary exchange relations, and that these structures of power which are very much rooted in economic institutions are in fact very unequal based on class, race, gender and other socio-economic stratifiers and result in conflict and very unequal life outcomes based on prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation. They have learned the concept of surplus product, how to define class in terms of disposition of the surplus product, and the existence of a succession of class-based economic systems from slavery to feudalism to capitalism. They have learned the distinction between the sphere of exchange and the sphere of production where the social relations between capitalists and workers represent a contested terrain. Students studied the theory of contested exchange in capitalism, the problem of labour
extraction, and the importance of cost of job loss as a determinant of relative bargaining power of capitalists and workers as well as the importance and role of labour unions as institutions that attempt to level the playing field between capitalists and workers, rather than the neoclassical view of inefficient monopolies.

b Students have examined class-based theories of the state, the class-contested terrain of politics, and ways in which rules of the capitalist economy are often at odds with the ideals of political democracy. They have also learned that capitalism is a contradictory system that generates extremes of wealth and poverty (inequality); is inherently expansionary generating development in some places at the expense of underdevelopment in other places (imperialism); and that the process of capital accumulation generates periods of expansion while simultaneously creating the conditions for economic crises.

c They have studied the Radical/Marxist view that the problems facing global and national capitalism are systemic ones and require replacing capitalism with a system that is more efficient, equitable, and democratic, one based on social ownership/control of the means of production, worker owned/run firms, public enterprises, limited markets, and democratic planning (democratic socialism).

4 From feminist economics:

a Students have learned that while human beings are in part individually unique they are also socially constructed, and one of the ways that individuals are socially constructed is based on their biological sex through a process of gendering; and when human attributes identified as ‘feminine’ are disparaged relative to ‘masculine traits’ this is called cultural sexism. They have also learned that economics is socially constructed and that the traditional definition, method, and key assumptions of economics are masculine and that the feminine traits are disparaged and marginalized within the discipline. Students have explored the ways the masculine bias in the scope, method and assumptions of NCE produces a decided market bias.

b Students have explored global and domestic gender inequalities, discrimination, and male economic dominance. Specifically, they have learned the differences in well-being (e.g., life expectancy, morbidity), literacy and school enrolment rates, access to health-care, income, poverty, participation in political life by gender (as well as other social stratifiers such as race, class, ethnicity, national-origin, sexual orientation). They have explored the links between these and inequalities in social, economic and political life in and outside the US and have learned to critically evaluate the gendered outcomes of globalisation and increased international trade, technological change and foreign direct investment.

c They have learned that understanding the economics of the family or household is an important component of any complete understanding of the economy in spite of its neglect in traditional economics, and that the traditional Beckerian approach to the family that treats the family as a harmonious unit has serious shortcomings that feminist economics attempts
to overcome. Students have learned to distinguish between ‘use’ versus ‘exchange’ value and the significance of the former in unpaid and/or subsistence production.

d Students have explored feminist policy recommendations modeled on the egalitarian family including basic health and social insurance, full employment policies, and a high standard of social welfare for children; equal sharing of costs of family labour, public compensation for value of family labour of caring for children, sick and elderly; equal opportunities and contributions for childcare and education; workplace rules that encourage men and women to combine family work and market work; family law reform embracing free rights of entry and exit for all; affirmative action to promote equal opportunity; and full reproductive rights.

- Our students in general have gained an understanding of particular sets of economic facts, issues, historical trends, and institutions through the study of economic history, macroeconomic performance and trends, income and wealth distributions, balance of international trade and finance, industry studies, and labour conditions.

Of course like all institutions of higher learning some students learn more than others; and not all of our students have learned all these lessons or learned them well. Nor can we claim that all of this material and these lessons are uniformly taught across all courses and by all faculties. Nevertheless, the potential for student learning and critical thinking at Dickinson College based on our curricular programme of Contending Economic Perspectives far exceeds that of traditional monistic economics programmes.

5 What have we learned?

What have faculty learned at Dickinson College from this experience? What have been our educational objectives and have we achieved them? Following Mearman et al. (2009) the objectives of a pluralist economics education can be divided into the goals of a liberal arts educational philosophy and the goals that are part of an instrumentalist philosophy. Liberal goals include critical and analytical thinking, comparative thinking, and intellectual open-mindedness, all goals that focus on an individual’s ability to think. Instrumentalist education goals include the benefits of specific learning outcomes including identifiable skills such as problem solving, knowing certain formulae or techniques, knowing and applying particular theories, or possession of knowledge of particular topics [Mearman et al., (2009), p.9].

Although it is perhaps useful to distinguish these two sets of educational goals, they are clearly not mutually exclusive as Mearman et al. (2009) and others recognise. It is clear to us here at Dickinson, that our contending perspectives philosophy of economic education has from its inception been based on elements of both liberal and instrumental educational goals, a reflection of our beliefs in the existence of multiple entry points and truths, and the value of different theoretical perspectives. Although we each may personally value more highly particular paradigms, we are not motivated by ‘radical paradigmism’ nor does this necessarily imply that we are ‘pan-paradigmatic’ (Garnet, 2008).
Dickinson College’s educational goals include both liberal and instrumental ones as evident from its mission statement:

“This vision of what we wish our students to become is complex, combining individual habits of mind with a willingness to engage constructively with others. Key elements of this vision...must include”:

- Intellectual curiosity – a strong commitment to inquiry that makes students lifelong learners and equips them well to understand and address the challenges of rapid change.
- A 21st century skill set of abilities commonly attributed to the liberal arts including critical thinking, analytical skills, capacity to synthesise insights and information from multiple fields and perspectives (to connect the dots), strong communication skills, and capability to master emerging technology.
- A commitment to engagement in local, national, and global communities, imbued with a strong sense of personal and social responsibility and ethics.
- Cross-cultural and global competence and sensitivity, informed by fluency in foreign languages; the ability to appreciate and thrive in a diverse, complex world.
- Appreciation of our core commitment to sustainability in the interests of a just, healthy and economically-viable world; respect that one should take no more from the planet than one needs and that leadership for the 21st century means operating in the context of less rather than more while simultaneously maintaining a competitive, entrepreneurial spirit – where others see incompatibility, seeing opportunity.
- The ability to live and work productively in ambiguity and uncertainty.

“In sum, we strive for – an education without an expiration date for our students – one that enables our graduates to find meaning and purpose in the private sphere, the workplace, and public arena across their entire lives.”
(Dickinson College, 2010)

Dickinson College and other institutions with a strong commitment to a liberal arts educational philosophy and the instrumental value of higher education are of course ideal places for pluralist economics to take root. From the very beginning at Dickinson this made the establishment of contending economics perspectives relatively easy. However, the initiative came from heterodox faculty, while gaining the departmental support of neoclassical faculty was more challenging, requiring lots of compromises.

I think our approach to contending perspectives has been quite successful, underscored by what our students have learned both in terms of the educational goals of a liberal arts philosophy and the educational goals of an instrumentalist philosophy, both used to rationalise our contending economics perspective approach to economics education (Barone, 1991). However, our success has not been without limitations. I think that the biggest lesson that can be drawn from our experience is the difficulty of trying to do all things well especially in a small economics programme with a large required service component, currently seven full-time tenure track faculty (five are heterodox) with a five course teaching load, and graduating an average of about 25–35 majors per year over the last decade or so. Add to this our commitment to maintaining a traditionally defined rigorous programme of mainstream economics while integrating other contending heterodox economic perspectives.
Here at Dickinson, the pressures of maintaining a commitment to a ‘strong and rigorous’ traditionally defined programme of mainstream economics education has tended to crowd out economic history and the history of thought in introductory economics and has left no time for a critical approach. And for those who have tried, it has been difficult to maintain theoretical rigour. This remains one area of contention within the Department and we have not re-imagined the place of how traditional economics should be taught within a pluralist undergraduate economics programme.

On the other hand, expectations for inclusiveness have placed pressures to include up to five heterodox theories in a one-semester long course which has been incredibly challenging. This included taking a brief look at the historical origins of each perspective because not doing so would make absolutely no sense, at least to any heterodox economist. Of course this was made all the more difficult because many of the students who come to this course had little to no prior knowledge of the history of thought because it had been crowded out in many instances in the introductory sequence. Furthermore, with only two to five weeks on each perspective we had to make a choice between a focus on the core theory and methods or a critique of traditional theory and methods. In most instances we choose the former, although we taught each heterodox theory comparatively with neoclassical theory and with each other. Beyond this there was no time to provide a critical assessment of each theory let alone a substantive critical evaluation of mainstream economics. In other words, there was little room to let the perspectives contend and this was left to subsequent courses. Also it quickly became evident that there was a paucity of adequate teaching materials and we were forced to write or make up our own in contrast to other courses especially mainstream ones where there are an abundance of textbooks.

Although in many ways quite unsatisfying, especially in light of the two years (four semesters) of indoctrination in neoclassical economic theory, this course did make a big difference to our students and although they certainly did not get much depth they did learn some important basics of each of these heterodox theories as well as many of the other lessons listed above. We stuck with this format for over ten years and then started expanding the time devoted to some perspectives, decreasing it for others, and dropping some altogether or rotating them among semesters. As noted above PKE was replaced with feminist economics. Ecological or steady state economics also got dropped as some attention is devoted to this perspective in our 200 level topics course on environmental economics. Our remaining focus is on institutional, radical/ Marxist, Austrian, and feminist economics; and one of us also includes a section where students select and report on recent books by economists some of whom are clearly writing from an identifiable heterodox perspective and others who do not fit so easily into one of the existing perspectives (see Appendix for my current syllabus).

Two basic approaches have been used in this course, one was a core theory/methods survey approach and the other emphasised a more tightly focused singular key distinction approach for each paradigm. Both seemed to work well given the overall course constraints even though instructors have had a clear preference for one or the other. However, in either approach I found (and still find) it hard to teach economic theories in such a truncated form knowing that a whole course or more would be required to teach the foundations of these heterodox economic theories. The end result is that while our students get breadth they do not get a rigorous programme of heterodox economics.

Beyond this heterodox course our programme has been somewhat successful in either more fully developing particular theories beyond the very brief introductions in the
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contending perspectives required course or in courses that consistently apply and bring together contending perspectives (including NCE) in upper level courses and senior seminars. The complaint from the neoclassical perspective is that there are too few applied upper level courses that offer rigorous application of NCE tools of analysis especially applications of intermediate microeconomic theory. The complaint from a heterodox perspective is that electives taught by neoclassical faculty often include little more than token heterodox perspectives. None-the-less, many of these upper level offerings are taught pluralistically with a focus on contending perspectives, and there are a good number of histories of thought-based offerings at this level reflecting the relative strength of our Department’s faculty.

Given the size of our Department, the very heavy demand for service courses, and a growing number of majors, the number of upper level course offerings is quite limited and somewhat haphazard. A number of us are also involved in interdisciplinary programmes and teach cross-listed courses at the 200 level which only require introductory level economics. For example, I teach courses cross-listed in sociology and American Studies, often with no prerequisites or one that requires a one-semester introductory course which serves non-economics majors. Others teach a variety of other courses at the 200 level in Environmental Studies, Latin American Studies, Policy Studies, Health Studies, Middle East Studies, and Women’s and Gender Studies. Economics majors can only count one of these 200 level electives towards their major. The overall result here is a less than ideal set of upper level offerings with three to four 300 level and two to three senior seminars per year with a fair amount of topical variance.

Finally, perhaps not unsurprisingly, the Department has paid far too little attention to theories of learning and the ways that this could help us to better articulate the goals of our contending perspectives programme as well as enhance our students learning experience. As economists, both heterodox and traditional, there is little to no emphasis on learning theory, that is, we receive no training as educators. This is true of other academic disciplines as well so it’s not just economists. Even at liberal arts colleges such as Dickinson where learning theory used to be valued institutionally it has tended to fall by the wayside as colleges have become more productionist with a heavier emphasis on faculty research and publications.

6 Conclusions

It should be clear than while our contending economic perspectives programme has limitations it has accomplished a great deal and it has gone a long way towards overcoming the many shortcomings of the traditional economics indoctrination of students and has improved substantially the undergraduate economics education of our students. While our programme is essentially unchanged after twenty-some years, when compared to vast majority of colleges and universities Dickinson College’s ‘contending economic perspectives’ is still a useful model for others. There is obviously much that we, our students, and others can learn from the Dickinson College ‘contending economics perspectives’ experience. Although the intellectual frontier has expanded significantly in terms of the philosophy of pluralism and economics and there is much that we can learn from this, it is clear that ‘contending economic perspectives’ is still a viable model of
economics education. The question is how might we improve and build on this very successful programme?

1. How might we better address the huge imbalance between the foundational depth and rigour of neoclassical theory versus heterodox theories? What is the appropriate level of foundational work necessary for perspectives to contend? Should NCE and its formalist models be the central focal point of a pluralistic economics programme even if it means that this will define the points of contention? Should traditional economics continue to be taught in the traditional way and is this consistent within a pluralistic programme? Should we follow the teaching economics through controversies model advocated by Giles Raveaud (2009) which is based on Steve Marglin’s introductory course at Harvard University? (Raveaud, 2009).

2. Is there a conflict or trade-off between an emphasis on the liberal goals of critical thinking skills and an emphasis on instrumental goals of education? Should the current format for our required course ‘contending economics perspectives’ be maintained? Given that there isn’t much room for perspectives to contend, might this course be more appropriately titled ‘Heterodox Economics?’ How much foundational (instrumental) learning is required in heterodox theories before meaningful contention (critical thinking) occurs?

3. How might we better make use of the insights of Perry (1970) on the stages of intellectual and ethical development making them more explicitly part of our educational programme along the lines suggested by Earl (2002) and discussed by Garnett (2009, p.65) and the ideas advanced by Peterson and McGoldrick (2009) in ‘Pluralism and Economic Education: A Learning Theory Approach’?

4. Given the high importance of the history of economic thought to a critical appreciation of traditional and heterodox economics, how can we ensure that our students are prepared? Should we adopt an approach to the study of economics based on classical political economy and let the history of economic ideas frame the debates and points of contention? Some schools have a required 100 level course in ‘Political Economy’ with a focus on Smith, Marx, Veblen, and Keynes leaving for later more specialised courses in particular heterodox theories.

5. Can we make better use of and rationalise our 300 level elective course offerings? How might our senior seminars (400 level) be a more effective capstone learning experiences?

Addressing these questions and concerns, overcoming our limitations, and dealing with the challenges we face will further advance pluralism within our Department and keep us on the advancing frontier of pluralist economics education. Some of these concerns and challenges may well be insurmountable given our Department size and our heavy service demands. However, there is still room for improvement and the prospects are good for a re-examination and re-thinking of our contending economics perspectives programme in light of the very excellent discussions and debates that have been generated over the last ten years by the international movement for pluralist economics.
Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the departmental colleagues who shared their perspectives about what our students have learned from our program and also those who read and commented on earlier drafts.

References


Notes

1. Dickinson College, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, is a four-year undergraduate private liberal arts college chartered in 1783.

2. Even this list certainly does not exhaust all the possible extant heterodox perspectives: Austrian economics, Behavioural economics, Black political economy, Ecological economics, Evolutionary economics, Feminist economics, Georgist economics, Historical economics, Radical Political Economy Institutionalism, Marxism, Post Keynesian economics, Postmodern economics, Postcolonial economics, Rhetorical economics, Social economics and Sraffian economics.

3. Microeconomics in Context (2004) by Neva Goodwin, Julie A. Nelson, Frank Ackerman and, Thomas Weisskopf adopted by one instructor at our college explicitly introduces the mainstream approach as one of the approaches to microeconomics. The book presents both the mainstream (traditional) and alternative approaches to microeconomic issues and extends the scope of microeconomics to cover concepts such as ‘human development’, ‘poverty’, intra-household distribution of resources that are usually left outside the scope of mainstream textbooks on microeconomics.

4. Raveaud is the co-founder of the ‘Post Autistic Economics Movement’ in 2000 and is now Assistant Professor of Economics at the Institute for European Studies, University of Paris 8.

5. Syllabus for Marglin’s course can be accessed and downloaded at: http://my.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k63612&pageid=icb.page278186

Appendix

Course syllabus ‘contending perspectives in economics’ Spring 2010-Barone

The discipline of economics is rich in diversity and contending perspectives. This is as true today as it has been historically. Indeed, much of the current controversy over goals, methods, and theoretical analysis, is rooted in a fertile intellectual tradition of contending perspectives. This course is an introduction to some but not all of the major contemporary contending perspectives in economics-heterodox economics. Exposure to these alternatives is essential to a complete understanding of today’s economic issues. The currently dominant theoretical perspective in economics, the neoclassical paradigm, is useful to understand some aspects of some economic problems, but, as with other ways of seeing, it is simultaneously a way of not seeing. You will discover as we examine some alternatives, different perspectives shed light of different intensity depending on the topic. This course traces out the historical evolution of three among several different perspectives in economics: Institutional, Radical, and Feminist Economics. The focus is on their core methods and theory.

Textbooks

- Barone, Charles. RPE (M.E. Sharpe, 2004)
- Bergsten, Gordon. Institutional Economics Reader (Revised 2004 Edition: College Print Center)
  a. Blackboard ‘course documents’ (BBDoc)
  b. Blackboard ‘course materials’ (BBMat)
Blackboard

There is a Blackboard website for this course (http://blackboard.dickinson.edu). To log on for the first time your password is set to your user name, you can change your password once you log on.

Course requirements

1 Prepare for each class by doing the readings and thinking about the material in advance. Lectures are designed to clarify and extend the assigned readings. Preparation requires that you have read and thought seriously about the assigned materials for each class. Participation in class means both sharing your ideas (by talking) and respecting and engaging the ideas of your classmates by actively listening and responding respectfully. In the words of the Provost and Dean of Dickinson College and Professor of History, Neil Weissman.

“Choose to take yourself seriously intellectually. Be willing to have your own opinions and to contribute. Yet not in the spirit of cogito ergo recte sentio (I think, therefore I’m right). Be curious, subject your views to criticism, consider alternate perspectives, work to gather and assess evidence, understand the limits of your and all our knowledge, and come to conclusions with both imagination and humility. In other words, enrich your engagement with the Dickinson community and wider world through inquiry. That is the ultimate reward of a Dickinson education. (Inquiry and Engagement: Reflections on the Dickinson Curriculum in its 226th year).”

The success of the course depends upon your thoughtful discussion. Your meaningful participation in class is worth from 0-10 points and includes attendance, the quality and quantity of your comments and questions, your attentiveness and the seriousness with which you engage the course materials. Your grade will be based on the following criteria:

- You are attentive, make few comments, and miss 2 or fewer classes* (6 pts)
- You are attentive, comment and raise questions at least once a week and miss two or fewer classes* (7 pts)
- You are attentive and show seriousness, frequently comment and raise questions, and miss two or fewer classes* (8 pts)
- You are attentive and show seriousness, your frequent comments and questions are particularly thoughtful, and miss two or fewer classes* (9 pts)
- You are attentive and show seriousness, your frequent comments and questions are particularly insightful, and miss two or fewer classes* (10 pts)

Note: *More absences will lower your number of points

2 Grading:

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<th>Points</th>
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<td>Preparation, participation, and discussion</td>
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<td>Two term exams (30 points each)</td>
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<td>FemEcon essay</td>
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<td>Final project/presentation</td>
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For your final project you will be assigned to a small group based on a particular book selected from a provided list of books. Your group will then write up a three to four page summary of author’s thesis and key supporting arguments. This will be followed by two to three page appraisal from a radical, institutionalist, and feminist economic perspective. Using PowerPoint your group will make a class presentation based on your paper (further details will be posted on Blackboard ‘assignments’).

**Course policies**

1. **Attendance**: see course requirements above.

2. **Academic honesty**: Dickinson College’s policies on academic integrity and honesty will be strictly enforced. Policies on cheating and plagiarism can be found in *The 2009–2010 community standards* [http://www.dickinson.edu/uploadedFiles/student_life/resources/dean_of_students/content/commstand0910.pdf](http://www.dickinson.edu/uploadedFiles/student_life/resources/dean_of_students/content/commstand0910.pdf).

3. **Accommodating students with disabilities**: In compliance with the Dickinson College policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss requests made by students with disabilities for academic accommodations. Such requests must be verified in advance by the Coordinator of Disability Services who will provide a signed copy of an accommodation letter, which must be presented to me prior to any accommodations being offered. Requests for academic accommodations should be made during the first three weeks of the semester (except for unusual circumstances) so that timely and appropriate arrangements can be made. Students requesting accommodations are required to register with Disability Services, located in Academic Advising, first floor of Biddle House. Please contact Marni Jones, Coordinator of Disability Services (at ext. 1080 or jonesmar@dickinson.edu) to verify their eligibility for reasonable and appropriate accommodations.

**Tentative course outline**

1. Perspectives in contention

   - **BBDOC** ‘A Brief History of the Post-Autistic Economics Movement’ Post Autistic Economics Network [http://www.paecon.net/HistoryPAE.htm](http://www.paecon.net/HistoryPAE.htm)
   - **BBDOC** French Economics Students ‘The Student Petition of Autisme-Economie’ June 2000. [http://www.paecon.net/PAEtexts/a-e-petition.htm](http://www.paecon.net/PAEtexts/a-e-petition.htm)
   - **BBDOC** Faculty ‘French Petition for a Debate on the Teaching of Economics’ July 2000. [http://www.paecon.net/PAEtexts/Fr-t-petition.htm](http://www.paecon.net/PAEtexts/Fr-t-petition.htm)
   - **BBDOC** ‘Economics at Notre Dame: An Open Letter’ [http://www.paecon.net](http://www.paecon.net)
   - **BBDOC** ‘Economists Letter to the Queen’

2. Institutional economics

   a. Introduction and historical origins

      Institutional Economics Reader, Part I: Intro and Chs. 1
b Institutions of modern capitalism
1 Markets
  IER, Ch.3
  _BBDOC_ Karl Polanyi, Chapter 4, ‘Societies and economics systems’ from _The Great Transformation_.
2 Technology and the Corporation
  IER, Ch.4
  _BBDOC_; Joel Bakan, _The Corporation_, Chs. 1–3.
3 Government
  IER, Ch. 6

c Economy and society
  IER, Ch.7

d Institutionalist reform ideas
  IER, Ch. 8

3 Radical political economy
a Marxian origins
  RPE, Ch. 1.
b Contemporary radical economics
  1 Method and core concepts
    RPE, Ch.2.
    _BBDoc_ Howard Sherman, _How Society Makes Itself_, Chs. 2–4
  2 Theory of Production and Work
    RPE, Ch. 3.
  3 The capitalist system
    RPE, Ch. 4
  4 The macrodynamics of capitalism
    RPE, Ch. 5.
  5 Visions for the future
    a Democratic capitalism vs. democratic socialism
      RPE, Ch. 6.
    b Economic democracy
      RPE, Ch. 6.

4 Feminist economics
a Introduction: why gender matters
  _BBDoc_, Institute for Women’s Policy Research Fact Sheet ‘The Gender Wage Gap’
  _BBDoc_, Institute for Women’s Policy Research Fact Sheet ‘The Gender Wage Gap by Occupation’
38 C. Barone

*BBDoc*, Bradley Schiller ‘Sex discrimination in labour market’
*BBDoc*, Nelson, Julie, *Feminism, Objectivity, and Economics*, Intro

b Core concepts

*BBDoc*, Nelson, pp.1–3; Chs. 1–2

c Family economics


d Feminist economic policies: work and family

*BBDOC*, Blau, Ferber, and Winkler, Ch. 10 ‘Policies affecting paid work and family’, *The Economics of Women*.

5 Extending our economic perspectives

- Advanced readings in heterodox economics