

# How to Establish Pluralism at the Department Level\*\*

## Cómo establecer el pluralismo a nivel departamental

Jack Reardon\*

### Resumen

Nuestra generación se enfrenta a muchos problemas como el cambio climático, el daño ambiental, la crisis financiera global, una disparidad palpable en el ingreso y la riqueza, el aumento de la deuda, y una crisis de salud. Estos problemas se refuerzan mutuamente y se empeoran. En el centro, sin embargo, es la disciplina de la Economía misma y la enseñanza de ésta, las que ofuscan la interrelación de nuestros problemas, acostumbran a sus estudiantes al sufrimiento humano y niega la discusión reflexiva de la condición humana. Atrás se quedaron los días en que una sola escuela de pensamiento podría considerarse suficiente para educar a la gente y proporcionar a los hacedores de política una serie de soluciones. Atrás se quedaron los días en que sólo una escuela de pensamiento en economía podría reclamar el monopolio del conocimiento, al tiempo que desestimara la legitimidad de todas las demás. Para resolver los problemas de nuestra generación necesitamos ciudadanos educados y economistas que entiendan la diversidad y sean capaces de trabajar el uno con el otro y con otros científicos sociales. En 2001, estudiantes de economía de Francia solicitaron a sus profesores una enseñanza más realista y pluralista de la economía. Desde aquella petición francesa, el pluralismo ha sido ampliamente aceptado como método de enseñanza. Varios libros se han escrito sobre la manera de enseñar economía pluralista, incluyendo *Teaching Pluralism in Economics*, de John Groenewegen (2007); *Pluralist Economics*, de Edward Fullbrook (Zed, 2009) y *Handbook of Pluralist Economics Education* de Jack Reardon (Routledge, 2009), entre otros. Bajo este contexto, el propósito de este artículo es el desarrollo de un plan sistemático para implementar el pluralismo a nivel departamental. En la primera parte se discutirán brevemente las ventajas del pluralismo, en la segunda sección se discutirán los elementos clave del plan, en la tercera sección se discutirán los posibles problemas y críticas, y en el cuarto se ofrecerán las observaciones finales. No es mi intención ofrecer una receta definitiva, sino que las propuestas son tentativas y sugerentes.

#### Palabras clave:

- Papel de la economía
- Enseñanza universitaria
- Microeconomía

JEL: A11, A22, B21

### Abstract

Our generation is confronted with many problems including climate change, environmental damage, a global financial crisis, a palpable disparity in income and wealth, escalating debt, and a health care crisis. These problems are mutually reinforcing and will only worsen. At the center, however, is the discipline of economics itself and economics education, which obfuscates the interrelationship of our problems, inures its students to human suffering and abnegates thoughtful discussion of the human predicament. Gone are the days when only one school of thought could be deemed sufficient to educate the public and provide policy makers with a range of solutions. Gone are the days when only one school of thought in economics could claim a monopoly on knowledge while derisively dismissing the legitimacy of all others. To solve the problems of our generation we need educated citizens and economists who understand diversity and are willing to work with each other and with other social scientists. In 2001 French economics students petitioned their professors for a more realistic and pluralist teaching of economics. Since the French petition, pluralism has become widely accepted as a method of teaching. Several books have been written on how to teach pluralist economics, including John Groenewegen's *Teaching Pluralism in Economics* (2007); Edward Fullbrook's *Pluralist Economics* (Zed, 2009) and Jack Reardon's *Handbook of Pluralist Economics Education* (Routledge, 2009), inter alia. In this context, the purpose of this paper is to develop a systematic plan for implementing pluralism at the department level. The first section will briefly discuss the advantages of pluralism; the second section will discuss the key elements of the plan; the third section will discuss its potential problems and criticisms; the fourth will offer concluding observations. It is not my intention to offer a definitive recipe; rather these proposals are tentative and suggestive.

#### Keywords:

- Role of Economics
- Undergraduate
- Microeconomics

Alfred Marshall wrote in his best-selling principles of economics text that “economic conditions are constantly changing, and each generation looks at its own problems in its own way.” [Marshall, 1920, p. v.] Our generation is

\*Professor of Economics School of Business Hamline University jreardon02@hamline.edu

\*\*Presented at the 4th International Seminar of Heterodox Microeconomics UNAM, Mexico City, October 29-31, 2012.



dox Economics and the International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics, for example, have emphasized the need for pluralism.

While many advocate the need for pluralism, empirical testing of the efficacy of pluralism is lagging, although tentative evidence is supportive. Granted, much more work needs to be done, yet, I am not aware of any empirical study that found that pluralism does not work.<sup>3</sup> As chief editor of the *IJPEE*, it is my objective to first of all convince educators of the value of pluralism while also providing a forum for discussion along with the resources for individual instructors to tailor their course so it is more pluralist.

But what about implementing pluralism at a broader level, say the entire department or the university? How does one go about this? To date most attention has focused on creating incentives and resources for the individual educator and for students,<sup>4</sup> given that it is both easier for one individual to implement pluralism than to implement it on a system wide level. Focus on the department level or university level has been lacking, and granted it is a more difficult than convincing a single educator, given that it is a cooperative venture involving many players, and most likely encountering a legion of obstacles.

The purpose of this lecture is to develop a systematic plan for implementing pluralism at the department level. The first section of this paper will briefly discuss the advantages of pluralism; the second section will discuss the key elements of the plan; the third section will discuss its potential problems and criticisms; the fourth will offer concluding observations. It is not my intention to offer a definitive recipe; rather these proposals are tentative and suggestive.

## The Advantages of Pluralism

While several definitions of pluralism exist- if not would it be pluralism?- a consensual definition that captures its essence is: a respect for the legitimacy of opposing views. Pluralism does not require that one agree with all other

<sup>3</sup> What would happen if such a study was found? Our null hypothesis is that pluralism works, however, contravening evidence would suggest a reexamination of the basic premise, hopefully with an open mind.

<sup>4</sup> Hill and Myatt's title, *The Economics Anti-Textbook: A Critical Thinker's Guide to Microeconomics*, acutely underscores the problem: students need a book not as a helpful guide in learning complex material but to unlearn what is written in their texts. While this book only tackles one subject in economics- microeconomics, the malaise and disconnect described by Hill and Myatt unfortunately affects all subjects within the discipline of economics. Expect more such books to be written.



lity, *i.e.*, usefulness for all kinds of all problems. Each paradigm or theoretical perspective may have something to offer and preference for one theoretical perspective over another is... partly a matter of ideology” (Soderbaum, 2008, p. 10).

5) Pluralism enhances student-based learning.

6) Only pluralism can instill passion back into economics.

7) And finally, if a reformed economics is to help make the world a better place — and it must — then economics must be concerned with justice, which in turn is interconnected at many levels with pluralist dialogue since, “not only are dialogue and communication part of the subject matter of the theory of justice... it is also the case that the nature, robustness and reach of the theories proposed themselves depend on contributions from discussion and discourse” (Sen, 2009, pp. 88-89).

8) Pluralism returns the fun to economics.

Pluralism is a contested and multi-faceted word existing at several levels: methodological- how we approach the study of reality; ontological- how we understand reality; epistemological- how we construct knowledge about reality; theoretical- how theories of reality are developed and pedagogical- what and how we teach the subject.<sup>5</sup> If we are to implement pluralism at the department level, it is imperative to decide at which level we should focus on. Traditionally the focus is on pedagogy, although I would argue that all levels are interrelated and it is impossible to be pluralist at one level and monist at others. While neoclassical economics has made some progress on the methodological level, it remains monist, most especially at the pedagogical level, as even a stalwart advocate of neoclassical economics and its methodological pluralism must admit, “I accept that critics of mainstream economics have a point until we economists teach what we preach” (Coyle, 2007, p. 250).

## Conceptualizing, Implementing and Assessing Pluralism

Pluralism can either be implemented from scratch as when a new university or new department is being constructed or grafted on to an existing department . Each scenario has its own unique characteristics and problems, but generally it is easier to implement pluralism from scratch given that there aren't existing obstacles and vested interests, and assuming that a consensus was reached in starting a new program. However changing an existing curriculum to make it more pluralist,

is a complicated process similar to that of changing institutions in general: the path is full of lock-ins, of interests of specific groups and individuals, of information asymmetry, strategic behavior, of power, and the like. The issue of how the economics curriculum should be designed and who decides on changing the curriculum is a matter of academic power (Groenewegen, 2007, p. 14).

<sup>5</sup> For a further discussion, see Dow 2007. And for an introduction to the historical evolution of pluralism please see (Negru, 2009; and Negru, 2010).



in pluralist course would tend to score lower than non-pluralist students, since the former can question the faulty logic or over-reliance on deductive reasoning. As Fred Lee advocates if heterodox economics is to succeed, and by success he calls for equal standing with neoclassical economics, then it is crucial to reform the assessment procedure,

But what is really necessary to do is for heterodox economics [to] challenge the research assessment exercises, subject benchmark statements, and the mainstream ranking of journals and departments through, perhaps, developing their own methods of research assessments and ranking of journals and departments (Lee 2009, p. 206).

I agree and would also extend Lee's argument to pluralism- it cannot succeed within the neoclassical dominated assessment procedure. So in order for pluralism to succeed at the department level, we must in addition, (or at least some of us) as Fred Lee suggests, work to change the assessment procedure.

Overall, this stage involves several key steps:

**Step One:** identify the key players that will be asked to implement pluralism. These should be divided into two groups direct and indirect. Among the direct players are teachers, administrators, students; and among the indirect are alumni and businesses that will potentially hire graduates of the program. In addition, it is important to remember that the university department is only one cog in an important continuum of education ranging from primary and secondary education to post-university and adult learning; thus it is suggested that key players from secondary schools as well as post graduate studies are invited and consulted. In order for pluralism to work, attention must be devoted to reformation at all levels of education. Also the media is important influencing values and the overall culture, which at least in the US is overwhelming pro-capitalist, which by default means pro-neoclassical. Nevertheless, open-minded journalists should be identified. Newspaper and magazine articles depicting pluralism should be written.

**Step Two:** if the university is serious about implementing pluralism then it is a worth-while investment to create a position, either full or part-time of a pluralism coordinator, to function as a liaison between the key players identified in the preceding step. Rather than a new hire, this person should be selected from the existing faculty who will then divide his/her time between teaching and the pluralism coordinator position. It is important to select the right person- right in the sense that the person will be the face of pluralism on campus. This person must have good verbal communication skills as well as an ability to conciliate with people from different backgrounds, and perhaps





**Step Seven:** A discussion amongst the key players over what is education, how it is acquired and how should we learn. Ostensibly this is a non-brainer: knowledge exists and must be acquired via student/teacher interaction. This, however, is too simple and also misleading, for as Weehuizen writes,

The main responsibility of education is no longer the mere transmission of some existing stock of knowledge, but rather training students in dealing with new knowledge in a meaningful way. Since we neither know what kind of knowledge will be available in the future, nor what kind of problems students will face in their future, transmission of knowledge has been reduced to being the main function of education to being merely a part of it. Students have to learn how to learn (Weehuizen, 2007, p. 178).

**Step Eight:** Discussion on whether the pluralism will involve only the discipline of economics or venture beyond to combine several disciplines. This is important especially for pedagogical purposes and deciding the legitimate boundaries for pluralism. And in addition,

real world problems require holistic solutions. This means an increasing need for building bridges or closing gaps that are growing between disciplines. A first step is bringing the disciplines together; an important next step is providing some form of integration of the underlying theories (Lemstra, 2007, p. 147).

And as Lemstra explains, we can either engage in,

multidisciplinary studies —cooperation between different disciplines... but applying the theories, methods and tools of each discipline independently... interdisciplinary integration of the theories, resulting in a theoretical foundation of the new or transdisciplinary— where the theory of one discipline is combined with empirical findings from another (Lemstra, 2007, p. 147).

**Step Nine:** Are there larger goals (beyond the individual department) in implementing pluralism? For example, defeating neoclassical economics as an outdated and misguided ideology (Fullbrook, 2011) or elevating heterodox economics or some individual discipline within it to a level equal with neoclassical economics (Lee, 2009). At the department level do these larger, more macro issues even matter?

**Step Ten:** identify the obstacles in implementing pluralism. Who are the vested interests in maintaining the status quo. It is important to identify the individuals and institutions are opposed to any transition. It is unrealistic to expect every faculty member to want or to be able to engage in pluralist teaching, but at the same time, the current system should not discourage such interested individuals from doing so.



But given the impossibility of dismantling the tenure system, can it somehow be used to foment and encourage pluralism, say by pairing tenured faculty with new faculty; or giving specific credit within the tenure system to those individuals willing to redo/revise their courses.

Within this second stage it is important to devise a set of prerequisites for every student majoring in economics before they begin their actual study. Offering a set prerequisites targets students by enabling them to withstand (and hopefully parry) the inevitable ideological neoclassical onslaught from later courses, and can provide a fruitful foundation from which pluralism can flourish. That we even need prereqs is testimony to how fundamentally flawed economics education has become. I have thought a lot about such courses and have discussed them elsewhere (Reardon, 2012). Here is an outline of my suggestions:

1. *World Literature*: There is no better primer on the diversity of the human condition than fiction. Properly taught, fiction can explain the myriad forms of behavior and human predicaments as good, or even better, than any individual academic discipline.
2. *History of Capitalist Systems*: It is essential for economics majors to understand how the present system of capitalism has evolved, the role of government and how people respond to contemporary problems by constructing appropriate institutions. There are alternatives to capitalism.
3. *History of Intellectual Thought*: A course in the history of intellectual thought will elucidate how ideas developed in response to certain problems; and students will understand how and why neoclassical economic theory was developed.
4. *Quantum Physics*: Not only are many of the accouterments of today's economy such as the CD, laser, computer, MRI and traffic lights the result of the intellectual achievements of quantum physics, but no better example exists of the scientific willingness to test and experiment and the openness to reform theory if necessary than quantum physics. A study of physics will reveal how a science progresses and evolves.
5. *Philosophy*: An introductory course, perhaps with a focus on ethics, aptly illustrates the tradition of philosophy for debating ideas within a pluralist context and the vanity of human understanding.

While we can debate whether these prereqs are too little or not enough and or whether they are the right ones, the basic point is that in order for pluralism to become effective, not only must the future educators be educated in how to teach a revised economics, but students must be prepared to be receptive to pluralism. Starting right in with the traditional macro/micro courses is a recipe for failure.

It is incumbent to design the exact course sequence which begins in the second year of study. Once again it is not imperative that every course share equally in the development of pluralism but that overall the courses integrate; and that traditional silos disappear. It is also imperative to remember that we



- 1) Excise the artificial and misleading divider between macro and micro.
- 2) Resuscitate and emphasize the richness of history of thought; there are lots of lessons to be learned.
- 3) Emphasis on pluralism throughout with humble consideration of what we don't know which can act as a lead-in or port of entry to other disciplines
- 4) Given the paucity of alternative ideologies held by most neoclassical economists, team teaching becomes essential, and alternative pedagogies such as student learning and problem-based learning.

If existing faculty are not capable of teaching such modules then perhaps some of the courses can be contracted out to those who can, perhaps only on a limited basis, since doing so can be quite contentious. In addition, two other contentious areas are: when should pluralism be introduced within the curriculum? Immediately or only after a foundation is well-established? But if the latter, what should this foundation be and who should determine it? If we wait until a good foundation in neoclassical economics is established than there will be a natural reaction against any suggested alternative,

Once a man's (*sic*) understanding has settled on something (either because it is an accepted belief or because it pleases him), it draws everything else also to support and agree with it. And if it encounters a larger number of more powerful countervailing examples, it either fails to notice them, or disregards them, or makes fine distinctions to dismiss and reject them, and all this with much dangerous prejudice, to preserve the authority of its first conceptions (Bacon 1620 [2000], Book I, XLVI, p. 42).

This recalcitrance is reinforced by the deliberate attitude of neoclassical economics to inculcate monism along with a hegemonic superior of economics and the economic approach.

The second contentious issue is whether to even teach neoclassical economics at all. Most pluralists agree that within the spirit of pluralism, it should be taught, not the very least for the reason that in order to understand its myriad criticisms, we understand it. I respectfully disagree: what other social science or science continues to teach failed, out-dated material? And this failed thinking is part of the problem,

Neoclassical economics, far from being the font of economic wisdom, is actually the biggest impediment to understanding how the economy actually works – and why, periodically, it has serious breakdowns. If we are ever to have an economic theory that actually describes the economy, let alone help us manage it, neoclassical economics has to go (Keen, 2011, p. 15).

A discipline should move on. If we are to help solve the problems of our generation than our students must be educated—and not proselytized— so why should we teach what is part of the problem? Sure, students should learn the



But this suggests increased focus on assessment within a pluralism framework, which is very different from the current assessment, dominated by neoclassical ideology. And given the testing procedure a student educated in a pluralist course would tend to score lower than non-pluralist students, since the former is capable of questioning the faulty logic or sloppy deductive reasoning. As Fred Lee advocates, if heterodox economics is to succeed, and by success he terms an equal standing with neoclassical economics, then it is crucial to reform the assessment procedure,

But what is really necessary to do is for heterodox economics [to] challenge the research assessment exercises, subject benchmark statements, and the mainstream ranking of journals and departments through, perhaps, developing their own methods of research assessments and ranking of journals and departments (Lee 2009, p. 206).

I agree and would also extend Lee's argument to pluralism—it cannot succeed within the neoclassical dominated assessment procedure. So in order for pluralism to succeed at the department level, we must in addition, (or at least some of us) as Fred Lee suggests, diligently work to change the assessment procedure.

Bacon's insight is apropos in deciding how to assess pluralism, "it is better to know as much as we need to know, and yet think we do not know everything, than to think that we know everything, and yet know none of the things we need to know" (Bacon, 1620 [2000], CXXVI, p. 97). Add to this a willingness to admit ignorance, a humble recognition of what we don't know and a humble willingness to work with other social scientists and we have the recipe for a successful conceptualization, implementation and assessment of pluralism. The trick is to actualize the specifics.

### **Criticisms/Shortcomings of Implementation**

An immediate criticism that comes to mind is if we are to teach our students pluralism then who is going to do this? How can we ask our professors to commit to pluralism when most have never been exposed to it? This is a serious problem and suggests that pluralism can only successfully be implemented over the long-term.

A second problem is obtaining the resources to implement pluralism. Resources are needed to train, conduct workshops, and in some cases hire new faculty. In an age of ubiquitous budget cuts, obtaining any extra funds might be difficult and an inability to do so might favor the status quo.





## References

- Bacon, Francis (1620 [2000]), *The New Organon*. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.
- Bruce, Steve (2008), *Fundamentalism*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK, Polity Press.
- Coyle, Diane (2007), *The Soulful Science What Economists Really Do and Why it Matters*. Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press.
- Dow, Sheila (2007) "Pluralism in Economics" in John Groenewegen, ed., *Teaching Pluralism in Economics*, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar, pp. 22-39.
- Dow, Sheila (2009), "History of Thought, Methodology and Pluralism" in Jack Reardon, ed. *The Handbook of Pluralist Economics Education*, London, Routledge, pp. 43-53.
- Fullbrook, Edward (2010), "How to Bring Economics into the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium by 2020", *Real-World Economics Review*, issue no. 54, 27 September 2010, pp. 89-102, <http://www.paecon.net/PAERreview/issue54/Kessler54.pdf>
- Graeber, David (2011), *Debt The First 5000 Years*. New York, Melville House.
- Groenewegen, John (2007), "On Pluralism and Interdisciplinarity in Economics" in John Groenewegen, ed., *Teaching Pluralism in Economics*, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar, pp. 1-21.
- Hill, Rod and Tony Myatt (2010), *The Economics Anti-Textbook A Critical Thinker's Guide to Microeconomics*. London, Zed Books.
- Keen, Steve (2011), *Debunking Economics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, Zed Books.
- Lee, Frederic (2009), *A History of Heterodox Economics Challenging the Mainstream in the Twentieth Century*, London, Routledge.
- Lemstra, Wolter (2007), "A Practitioner's Perspective on Interdisciplinarity in Education: The MBT Case," in John Groenewegen, ed., *Teaching Pluralism in Economics*, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar, pp. 140-154.
- Negru, Ioana (2010), "Plurality to Pluralism in Economics Pedagogy: the Role of Critical Thinking," *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 185-193.
- Negru, Ioana (2009), "Reflections on Pluralism in Economics" *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, Vol. I, Nos 1/2. pp. 7-21.
- Reardon, Jack (2011), "Tenure: An Obstacle to Change" *BizEd* Vol. x, Issue 2, March/April, pp. 66-67.
- Reardon, Jack (2009a), "Introduction and Overview" in Jack Reardon, ed. *The Handbook of Pluralist Economics Education*, London, Routledge, pp. 3-16.
- Reardon, Jack (2009b), "Conclusion" in Jack Reardon, ed. *The Handbook of Pluralist Economics Education*, London, Routledge, pp. 267-268.

