



Does Pluralism in Economics Education Make Better Educated, Happier Students? A Qualitative Analysis

Andrew Mearman, Tim Wakeley, Gamila Shoib and Don Webber

Abstract

This paper contributes to the debate on pluralism in the economics curriculum. Here pluralism means a diversity of theoretical perspectives. One set of pedagogical arguments for pluralism are those found in 'liberal' philosophy of education. To this end, the first part of the paper presents arguments for pluralism based on 'liberal' pedagogical arguments. The paper also notes more instrumental arguments for pluralism and the barriers to such an approach. Finally, the paper considers new primary evidence from focus groups on student perceptions of economics. This evidence shows support for the arguments that a pluralist curriculum is popular and develops cognitive capacities of criticism, comparison and analysis – exactly those argued for in (liberal) pedagogical discussion – as well as judgement, understanding and writing skills. However, pluralism as a teaching strategy may be more difficult for those delivering it.

JEL classification: A20, A13, A12, B40

1. Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the debate on pluralism in economics education. It builds on arguments, for example in Clarke and Mearman (2003), that in constructing curricula, the educational aims of a programme must be considered (and preferably expressed) and that content and teaching method should be organised as far as is practical with those aims in mind. In particular, 'liberal' pedagogy suggests specific aims. Clarke and Mearman (2003) argued indirectly for pluralism via an argument for the teaching of Marxism. This paper builds on that work by developing these arguments for pluralism directly; and by presenting new primary evidence on student perceptions of economics.

The first part of the paper examines specific liberal educational arguments for a pluralist curriculum. The main argument is that students will be better educated in pluralist curricula. The second part of the paper then considers barriers to this pluralist approach. The third part presents evidence from research into student perceptions of economics via focus groups (and some student evaluations). This evidence shows tentative support for the arguments that a pluralist curriculum is popular and develops cognitive capacities of criticism, comparison and open-mindedness – exactly those argued for in liberal pedagogy – as well as judgement, understanding and writing skills. Naturally, these results are preliminary and suggest several directions for further empirical work.

2. Some educational arguments for pluralism

Here pluralism refers mainly to a diversity of theoretical perspectives. There are several arguments for pluralist curricula. These include (ontological) claims that the nature of the world is such that no single theory could explain it (see Dow, 1996, 1997, 2008; Mäki, 1997; Holcombe, 2008); and (epistemological) claims that no single standard exists for adjudging one theory as being the best one, and that all theories are fallible (see Budzinski, 2008; Mearman, 2008). These claims could *per se* create an argument for a pluralist pedagogy. If the goal of education were to prepare students for the world, educating them in a way which inculcates ways of thinking suited to its actual state would seem sensible. For example, students might be taught about complexity, given the considerable evidence that the world operates like a complex system. However, arguments such as these for the superiority of one position run into the epistemological arguments about the fallibility of theories. Further, it is possible to be a pedagogical pluralist without being either ontologically or epistemologically pluralist. Recently, other authors have made pedagogical arguments for pluralist curricula. Many of these are present, and are surveyed, in Reardon (2009). Fullbrook (2009) draws on arguments similar to those above. Van Dalen (2003) offers arguments which suggest that through economic mechanisms such as competition and creativity, a better economics would be produced. It would be more useful to students as a result.

Linked to that point is another general pedagogical argument that should be made which suggests the advantages of pluralism. It utilises the distinction between the 'cognitive' and 'affective' domains of education (from Bloom, *et al.*, 1964, p. 57). To summarise, in order for the cognitive dimension of the student to develop, they must be engaged with the material. This can be achieved in many ways, e.g. by the use of examples. We may also appeal to the instrumentalism of students by suggesting that concept *x* is worth learning because it will help them earn more. Another way to gain students' interest is to relate to contemporary real problems. Indeed, at a recent event at one of the authors' institutions, 250 students attended an extra-curricular 90-minute event discussing the 'credit crunch'. Moreover, the importance of realism is implicit in several pedagogical literatures, including experiential research, Inquiry-Based Learning, Problem-Based Learning, and Action Research (see Laurillard, 2008; Fry and Love, 2007). Research on computer games suggests verisimilitude is an important feature in appealing to players (for example, see Schultze and Rennecker, 2007). Gruene-Yanoff (2009) suggests credibility of theories is also important.

Klamer and Colander (1987) suggest that students find relevance of theory to be important to them; and that economics graduate students found the irrelevance of much Economic theory disengaging (see also Johnston, *et al.*, 2000). For many students, excessive theorisation (and a lack of realism) can be significant in reducing interest in economics (Mearman, 2008). Analysis of qualitative data collected also suggests that unrealistic assumptions and models are a serious problem in achieving student interest. Some argue that some perspectives in economics tend to display these (undesirable) traits less than others (Lawson, 2003) and thus it can be argued that they can be more engaging. The growth of the Post Autistic Economics movement suggests this to be the case (Fullbrook, 2003). However, a potentially disengaging facet of so-called heterodox economics is that for some it appears incoherent. Nonetheless, teaching pluralistically, perhaps through current events, may be more engaging than simply learning one set of theories. Recent economic events have led to a resurgence in interest in several non-mainstream economists, including Keynes, Marx and Minsky. Usually, too, these current events involve complex debates, which our evidence suggests can be engaging.

3. The role of educational aims

From an educational point of view, though, many of the above arguments are moot because they miss – or perhaps assume away – the essential point, which is to arrive at a set of goals of education which then condition the content and process of provision. It is necessary to know the aims of education before deciding on its process and content. In debates on the aims or goals of education, an analytical distinction is often made between 'liberal' and 'instrumentalist' approaches to education. The

dichotomy rests on a further distinction between 'intrinsically' and 'instrumentally' beneficial education. This paper now goes on to examine arguments for pluralist economics based on this distinction.

4. 'Liberal' aims of education

This type of education is also referred to as 'intrinsic education' in the literature, because it suggests that education is intrinsically valuable *per se*. For Bridges (1992) its central feature is "to equip people to make their own free, autonomous choices about the life they will lead" (p. 92) which implies:

- i. an ability to treat *critically* and of course also informedly, ideas and beliefs put forward by other people;
- ii. an awareness of the wider alternatives ... available upon which one may *exercise choice*;
- iii. a level of *personal independence or autonomy* which gives one the will, courage or confidence to act on one's own beliefs.

(Bridges, 1992, p. 92, emphasis added)

These three goals can be more succinctly classified as critical and analytical (evaluative) thinking; comparative thinking; and intellectual open-mindedness. They collectively aim at the achievement of intellectual capacities, i.e. at the process of thinking within the individual. These aims mean that curricular content is only relevant in achieving outcomes that are (thought) processual – and content should be assessed according to its ability to achieve these outcomes; and 'facts' and 'knowledge' are de-emphasised.

We would argue that a pluralist approach would achieve these intrinsic aims *better* than a monist one. Analytical thought, arguably, can be achieved within a single approach. Indeed, mainstream economics, as it is taught, arguably scores highly on analytical thought. Its emphasis on modelling, mathematics and precision, diagrammatic expression, and concepts such as opportunity cost all help students develop analytical capacity. However, non-mainstream approaches have similar qualities. For example, Keynesian economics also develops analytical thinking, through the above techniques, and through a type of 'human logic' (see Dow, 2004). Austrian economics forces students to engage with non-equilibrium thinking. Thus, a pluralist approach may be beneficial in terms of analytical approaches in that it furnishes students with a *wider set* of analytical capacities. This may help them think flexibly in a complex world and equip them with the tools to apply different approaches to different situations.

Similar arguments can be made about critical thinking. Critical thinking has been considered explicitly in economics pedagogy by, for example, Earl (2002), Feiner (2002) and Guerrien (2002, 2009). Here, critical thinking means simply that the student interrogates the material (and perhaps the world and their perception of it). Clearly, any perspective may be taught critically in this way and any perspective could be the vehicle for critical thinking. Indeed, in the primary research reported below, on many occasions, students respond that by studying economics they have learned to think differently, and they have learned to question prior beliefs. The key to achieving critical thinking would appear to be that students are exposed to a critical attitude on the part of their lecturers (by not merely using critical thinking exercises). Criticality could clearly be achieved within any programme, but a pluralist approach may achieve critical thinking more effectively than a monist approach. This may occur in several ways. Given that all heterodox theories are partly critiques of the mainstream, they are inherently (albeit not exhaustively) critical. Critique can of course be either internal (in the sense that evidence might all be from one theoretical perspective, using the same methodology, etc.) or external. The process of critique we have been discussing above has been primarily internal. However, of course external critique is available in economics through a variety of channels. For instance, one can confront students with theory or evidence which is distinctly critical of one view or another. Indeed, in a module delivered by two of the authors, students are explicitly required to criticise articles they read and confront them with

evidence which either supports or undermines the paper's view to some degree. Student evaluations on this module comment that it involves deep thought and analysis, and encourages them to think independently and make decisions.

The point of pluralism is to make these processes more effective. It is to emphasise the role of external critique. It is to propose that students are forced to consider and perhaps reconcile diametrically opposed views. Thus, an approach of teaching multiple perspectives is desirable, because it increases the likelihood that the critical faculty of the student will be augmented. A critical curriculum also insures against the possibility that a teacher eschews or does not promote effectively internal critique.

At the same time, by definition, by studying different views on the same topic, the students' comparative thinking faculty would be exercised effectively. Thus, it can be argued that analytical, critical and comparative thinking can be achieved more effectively in a pluralist rather than monist curriculum. Similar arguments may be made in terms of instrumental aims and outcomes.

5. Instrumental(ist) aims

The pedagogical case for pluralism can also be made in terms of so-called instrumental benefits. Instrumental benefits are those concrete, identifiable skills, such as the ability to solve certain types of problem, know formulae or techniques, remember and perhaps apply theory, or possess 'knowledge' of a topic. In general, instrumental benefits involve the achievement of specific narrow learning outcomes. Clearly, all education will involve instrumental outcomes, even if they are not intended or explicitly stated. In order to engage in critical evaluation of a theory, it is necessary to know and understand it: both are instrumental outcomes. Learning basic arithmetic is obviously useful in many facets of life but it is also an aim of education that students are able to do arithmetic. A student can therefore achieve intrinsic and instrumental benefits simultaneously.

An education which is *geared towards* such instrumental goals may be regarded as 'instrumentalist'. An example of instrumentalist education is one in which a student is indoctrinated into a particular view or behaviour. For Hobsbawm (1997) state education was begun with indoctrination in mind. More broadly, though, any educational process can be regarded as indoctrinatory if its content is delivered uncritically: contrary to the tenets of 'liberal' education discussed above.

How might pluralism serve the needs of instrumental/ist education? On one hand, there may be an obligation to provide knowledge which is useful. If the world is complex, then students need to learn multiple theories, all of which are fallible. If theory X can partially illuminate phenomena, it is useful to learning. Also, as Clarke and Mearman (2001) note, learning theory X may mean that theory Y is understood better. Both theories may provide policy proposals, seem highly relevant, inspire debate and argument, and link to other disciplines. Moreover, in open, complex environments, there may also be a need for multiple methods and techniques: pluralism equips students with different methodological approaches to problems and different tools with which to solve them (see Downward and Mearman, 2007). Further, by teaching in terms of debates, students learn to negotiate their way through difficult issues on which there are multiple perspectives. In short, they learn judgement. Thus, students become more creative, better problem-solvers, and, by dealing with multiple perspectives, which have different methodological and even ethical bases, students learn to better negotiate complex, difficult situations.

These are all crucial qualities for potential employees to have. All could make workers more productive. Such considerations are relevant in the light of an increasing focus on employability of graduates. O'Doherty *et al.* (2007)'s survey of employers of economics graduates employed as economists suggested that employers value communication, complex problem solving, the ability to think systemically and debating skills. All of these suggest a role for pluralism; most obviously debating skills. From the arguments presented above, these demands suggest a role for pluralist curricula. Ironically

perhaps, then, students trained in pluralist curricula could be better educated in an instrumentalist sense than those in a monist scheme. However, employability could conflict with intrinsic aims of education, depending on how the teaching is done (see Clarke and Mearman, 2004). If workers are trained to be compliant and robotic process followers, liberal goals will be confounded. At this point education becomes *instrumentalist*. Similarly if the focus of the instructor is on the learning of any theoretical concept rather than its interrogation, the liberal aims may be lost. A pluralist approach may again insure against this outcome.

6. Barriers to pluralism

Some may argue that the case for pluralism is obvious and that the interesting question is why pluralism has not been adopted. Here, briefly, one reason is discussed: the pedagogical arguments that students struggle with ambiguity. An approach in which students deal with debates or deal with multiple perspectives concurrently may have many benefits, but a danger is that students get too confused, nihilistic or disengaged. Earl (2009) shows that an instructor who tries to push their students too quickly in this way could come unstuck and lose them. A chief benefit of the pluralist approach is that it allows students to make up their own minds and to make tentative commitments to theoretical positions, whilst acknowledging that others exist and that all have merits and problems. However, as Earl notes, this way of thinking does not occur overnight, nor can students be dragged to that level. Most start off as what Earl (from Perry) calls 'dualistic', i.e. right and wrong, thinkers: one theory must be the whole truth, or it is useless.

The extent of contrast used may be of crucial importance. Indeed, this is an important question for justifying the inclusion of heterodox approaches generally. From a Piagetian pedagogical perspective, a strong contrast is necessary: dissonance is necessary and the development of the student is shown in its resolution or *equilibration* (see Smith, 2004). In that regard, strong contrasts – even if between caricatured positions – may be desirable. Where parallel perspectives also involve different ethical or political bases – or indeed any other example of interdisciplinary content – this effect could be magnified. However, in Vygotskyian pedagogy, also, it is necessary that students are not exposed to concepts too far outside their *zone of proximal development*, and that therefore trying to understand the contrast between, say, mainstream and radical viewpoints may be too difficult. A mainstream teacher could argue that comparative thinking and debate could be achieved within a mainstream curriculum. For instance, there may be a debate over the specification of a production function, or the value of its parameter(s). It might be that all of the benefits of the comparative approach could be achieved and the potential confusion could be avoided.

It is essential then that the tutor employing pluralism is careful in their delivery. Students should be encouraged to think comparatively and critically, and to do so early in their study. It is imperative that the lecturer communicates to the students early on and repeatedly what they are trying to do (Earl, 2009). The design of assessment may be important here. For example, essays of increasing length and significance in terms of marks can ease students into the habit of thinking critically and openly (Mearman, 2007). A stress on the need to make an argument and develop a position can be similarly beneficial. Questions in the style of 'compare and contrast' may be particularly beneficial. One student evaluation suggested that a class debate before writing the essay would be useful to clarify the issues pertinent to it. Earl further suggests that tutors need to spend more time offering feedback on exactly how the argument could have been improved. Through detailed feedback, it may be possible to build confidence in students, enabling them to take positions on issues. Crucially, students must feel able to reach the conclusion that if they find a theory or model counter-intuitive or contradictory, that might be because the theory is indeed so, and that their confusion is not merely their own fault. Mearman (2007) discusses these issues further. As a final point, it is perhaps worth noting that most introductory macroeconomics courses are taught in terms of debates (and history), which confounds the view that students early in their economics study cannot cope with ambiguity.

7. Some empirical evidence

Barone (1991) holds that students also exposed to heterodox material at Dickinson College developed from dualistic thinkers, displayed greater understanding, were more effective critical thinkers, displayed improved judgement and confidence and were better performers in policy debates. However, besides that there is little evidence on the efficacy of teaching pluralist economics. Most of the small amount of the empirical work on teaching (even if interest in the subject is higher) focuses on the effective teaching of mainstream economics. Work that has been done by heterodox economists tends to be in making the case for teaching heterodoxy and developing materials which can be used. Most of the heterodox work focuses on content: they argue that economics student numbers fell in the 1980s and stayed low (cf. Salemi and Siegfried, 1999; and Siegfried, 2008) because *economics* is problematic (see Knoedler and Underwood, 2003). This work crowds out empirical work even further. Systematic empirical study of the effectiveness of pluralist approaches is required. We are encouraged by recent developments in this area, for instance as discussed in Garnett and Mearman (2011)'s retrospective on Barone's work.

Mearman *et al.* (2008) and Webber *et al.* (2009) analysed an online survey of students. Students were found to be heterogeneous; however, some more general findings are worth noting. The results suggest that confusion creates negative perception of economics, particularly when confusion is also positively associated with frustration, and negatively associated with the perception of economics as helping people make better decisions. However, the survey analysis to date does not tell us the source of the confusion; nor does it tell us which type of students might be relatively more confused. The survey finished with two open-ended questions in which students were asked first to name three concepts from their current economics units which added most to their understanding of the real world and, second, to list topics which they would have liked to see covered but which were not, respectively. The word 'debate' did not occur frequently either as something students liked or wanted more of. However, there were some other indicators of a demand for pluralism, for instance in the references to specific schools of thought.

The remainder of the paper draws on new primary data, mainly from focus groups conducted during 2007 and 2008. Before discussing the focus group research, it is worth summarising some of the findings we might expect to see in that data. A pluralist approach should, it has been argued, produce greater engagement on the part of students, the development of intellectual capacities and practical skills, greater capacity for judgement, greater understanding, and make students more employable, but with the danger that it generates confusion. We shall see that all of these are suggested to some extent in the focus group data.

8. Focus groups

Focus groups are an established means of collecting qualitative data (see Flick, 2006, Ch. 15; Table 16.1). They are a group discussion led by a moderator on a topic of interest. They mimic social situations, albeit somewhat artificially, and provide insights into beliefs, attitudes and understanding. As with most qualitative data, they allow participants to speak in their own language, and they allow surprising findings to emerge. They are not associated with testing hypotheses, although the researcher typically enters them with some key research questions (see previous paragraph) in mind. In each focus group, the question put to students was 'how effective is economics in creating understanding of real world issues?' This question is general enough to generate a number of strands of discussion, which indeed happened.

The process of organising the focus groups yielded variety in their composition. Two of the universities were middle-to-low ranking, and the other three were middle-to-high ranking (according to the THES). The sample could thus have benefited from the inclusion of a high-ranking and a low-ranking institution. One of the universities was in Scotland, the others in England. One of the universities

teaches mainly by distance learning to mature students. In terms of individual group members, there is considerable variety in terms of gender, nationality, age, main occupation and course of study. The average age of the participants was 27 (likely higher than average); 12 out of 23 (52.2%) were male (compared to a UK average of 65.1% (source: HESA, 2006/7)); 15 of 23 (65.2%) were full-time students (compared to a UK average of 88.6% (source: HESA, 2006/7)); 14 of 21 (66.6%) were UK students (compared to a UK average of 61.6 per cent (source: HESA, 2006/7)); 7 of 23 (30.4 per cent) were studying economics and of the others (two unassigned), all but one was studying some combination of economics and another subject; 17 of 21 (81.0%) (two unassigned) were in their final stage of undergraduate study. The students were not asked about ethnicity.

One clear source of possible bias in the organisation of focus groups is that the students may have been unusually predisposed to heterodoxy or pluralism. Given that the initial known points of contact tended to be colleagues of the author(s) and thus sympathetic to heterodox thought, this could have led to sample selection bias. However, in each case, the local contact approached all students in their teaching group and took all the volunteers who came. Another way in which heterodox bias could creep in is that the students could have been taught heterodox material. Indeed, in all five cases, to varying degrees, that was the case. However, in four of the cases, all students were taught predominantly mainstream material. In one of those, though, the students had been selected from a history of thought/methodology group, which might bias them towards heterodox concerns. In the fifth case, the students were taught an explicitly pluralist programme. Thus, the focus group members were almost certainly not representative in terms of their exposure to pluralist curricula. However, it is not inevitable that the groups would be in favour of pluralism: they might well be very confused by it, as discussed above.

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and analysed using *Nvivo*. A variety of findings emerged from them. Some concern and expression was noted about the emphasis in teaching on mathematics; however, often students recognised the importance and usefulness of mathematics as a part of economics. They also recognised the importance of evidence of other types, including data of different types. Students also spoke approvingly about using different types of logic for different situations. Included in that category was a recognition of the value of looking at problems from different perspectives: the vast majority of participants expressed a preference for studying a range of perspectives and understanding the debates which occur. Students also noted that in studying economics, they drew helpfully on other disciplines, namely ethics, politics, philosophy, psychology, history, ecology and sociology. This highlights the possible benefits of another form of pluralism: interdisciplinarity.

To sum up the case for pluralism and debate, we can examine one quotation from the focus groups, which expresses several benefits of the pluralist approach:

'...I found it fascinating studying it ...we do have a bit of a difficulty [in that] we've been presented with all these different [views] ... But I think it's necessary at this stage to be presented with the alternative views, because we're not studying neoclassical economics, we're studying economics. So I think it is quite broad and I do actually enjoy the slightly conflicting way that some of it's being taught. But I do think than rather than saying this is... "Read this and it will tell you how that works." It's not doing that, it's saying "Read this and it may give you an insight, give you an understanding of some processes."... But you have to bring a lot to it as well, it's not like studying maths where you can just learn the answers, you have to bring a lot to it yourself, I think, and it is a kind of... it is giving the tools to be able to do things with them rather than giving you the answers...'

This is a rich quotation because it conveys that a pluralist approach creates engagement ('I found it fascinating studying it'); the student is happy with ambiguity ('But I think it's necessary at this stage to be presented with the alternative views, because we're not studying neoclassical economics, we're studying economics'); the student recognises the partial nature of knowledge ('Read this and it may give you an insight, give you an understanding of some processes'); the approach stimulates active learning ('You have to bring a lot to it yourself'); and the approach provides ways of thinking about economics and the economy rather than imposing a view ('It is giving the tools to be able to do things with them rather than giving you the answers'). Here it is evident that both intrinsic and instrumental benefits of education are achieved.

One reason why pluralism was considered useful was that it encouraged several cognitive abilities to develop in students. For instance, the use of judgement was recognised as important: and this flowed from a recognition – and, crucially, acceptance – of ambiguity and uncertainty. In terms of Earl's (2009) framework, these students were no longer dualistic thinkers and were cognitively more developed. Participants expressed the belief that studying economics had made them more questioning, critical and able to argue: and that this was independent of their overall maturity and experience. That suggests that students want to be equipped to make better, more informed decisions. Such skills could be valuable *per se*, but also were considered by some participants as desirable for employability. Such concerns also relate to the ability of graduates to make decisions in a business context. Also, the desire to be able to make better decisions relates to participants' preference for and interests in policy; and in turn an expressed preference for Macroeconomics over Microeconomics. Both of those preferences were also found in the survey results. Some illustrative examples of quotations help illuminate this discussion.

Several students emphasised the role of judgement:

'...like when you look at politics in this country you can go to the right or the left or you can try to stick in the middle and form your own opinion based on the information you're given'.

This quotation also suggests that students felt their ability to debate or argue a case had improved. Other students echoed that sentiment:

'A lot of my friends just all make comments and I think "Well, you can't just say that, without, you know, without justifying it".'

A comment from student evaluations supports that view:

'I like a mixture [of views] so you can get a feeling from both sides of an argument.'

Another student argued:

'I think with economics there's a lot more critical, like it's not just straight down the line, ... from day one whatever you do you know that there's an opposing view, I think everything you learn, you know that someone's going to contradict it and I think that, because you can't look at something at face value I think it's taught me to look at something... not leave it but to look around it before I make my own decision, my own judgement, whereas I don't think I would get that from another subject like, I studied maths and maths is right or wrong... economics is just, grey, the whole thing is grey and you can argue whatever you want really as long as you've got something to back it up.'

This quotation reinforces the contention that pluralism and debate develop judgement, but also criticality, and that the student is happy with ambiguity. However, the student is clear that baseless opinion is not adequate; thus a relativism in which all opinions have equal value irrespective of their logic or evidential base – one potential problem of pluralism – is avoided.

Several students support the claim that pluralism, i.e. having access to multiple viewpoints, increases understanding:

‘But I think you could benefit a lot, or you do benefit a lot from looking at a situation and saying, “Okay, how would this school of thought solve it and what’s this school of thought view’s on it” and like that analysing it and it makes you understand the different schools better by actually seeing that in reality if you applied that policy what would actually happen, what would be the consequences and yeah, what could be an alternative policy instead of just saying, solve this problem. It’s a different way of looking at it in that sense.’

The quotation suggests that this student feels that multiple theories allow them to see different aspects of a problem and understand it better and that problem-solving may improve. Significantly also, the quotation suggests students are happy with the ambiguity of having multiple theories and no single correct answer. They also seemed happy with the fallibility of theories. This is an important issue because of the common claim that students find multiple perspectives too confusing. Another comment from a student evaluation on an introductory module about an assignment which explicitly demanded a comparative approach reinforces this view: ‘I found the paper difficult to write, but yes I feel I was able to express my opinions’. Evidence from student evaluations collected by one of the authors reinforces the view that a pluralist curriculum may help argumentative and writing skills: ‘I learned how to write an argumentative paper’; ‘I learned to form more concrete opinions and argue them.’

In addition to the benefits outlined above, students also suggested that teaching via debates was more interesting, and engaging. As one student put it: ‘Cos in macro we’ve seen what Keynesians think, or what post-Keynesians think ... and then we make up our mind easily because we see contradiction and then we go like, oh, okay, well actually this one’s kind of right, that’s kind of wrong ... it probably makes us think easier than the micro last year.’ One student evaluation commented that the pluralist module was: ‘[o]ne of the most interesting modules of the year, due to the requirement to think about economics in different ways’. Another said: ‘I think this [debate] is the most interesting way to learn. It lets you see both sides.’ These comments explicitly refer to the benefit of pluralism in terms of the increased engagement the students felt.

Of course, not all students are as happy with the approach as those above; there is some evidence that debate confuses students: ‘But, [there] appear to be so many schools of thought within economics and different ways of interpreting the same thing that I just find it difficult to say that economics as a body can explain something because two eminently respectable economists may explain something in completely different ways.’ This comment was expressing frustration but could also be interpreted as being reconciled to uncertainty. More clear is the following comment: ‘you’re learning about one certain view and you kind of think, okay, I’ve understood that and then another economist comes in and tells you something completely different and I kind of find hard to follow all of them’. The focus groups echo this sentiment. One source of such confusion might be age, as younger students may be more dualist than older ones; however, this is not the case: although mature students often seemed happy with ambiguity, so too did standard-age students. Some student evaluations also expressed confusion: ‘I think sometimes there is too much confusion on which is which, but the stress that is emphasised on the difference between them feels unnecessary. I think that we should [understand] that there is a difference of opinion, but not [in] everything.’ Other students commented that at first the comparative approach was difficult, but that they saw the benefits eventually. These comments illustrated that students may need assistance in adapting to a pluralist approach. Thus data from focus groups suggest that for students the positive benefits of debate and engagement outweigh the negatives of confusion. This result appears to be robust for gender and age. Students explicitly spoke of the benefits of learning pluralistically in terms of judgement, analysis and criticality. These sentiments are supported in student evaluations collected by the authors.

9. Conclusions

This paper has investigated the question of pluralism within economics education. It has presented specific pedagogical arguments based on a liberal educational philosophy – which stresses the intrinsic benefit of education – for pluralism: specifically, the intellectual benefits of education may be achieved more easily through a pluralist approach. A pluralist approach means, in this context, that more than one economic perspective is considered, and that proponents of these perspectives are forced to engage in comparison. This is best done if the teacher is open to a pluralist approach; but the nature of the approach insures against excessive bias by the teacher towards or against any specific approach. However, there may also be instrumental benefits of a pluralist approach: students may understand topics better, and be able to cope with decision making and evaluation in complex environments. These benefits may have a pay-off in terms of student employability.

The theoretical arguments are supported here by drawing on new primary evidence from focus groups in UK universities and various student evaluations. The evidence is exploratory and its conclusions are tentative. However, it suggests that students enjoy debate and see the benefits of both in terms of their personal intellectual development. However, there is also evidence of some confusion amongst students resulting from being confronted with multiple perspectives. That highlights the theory, in Earl (2009), that teachers aiming to teach a parallel perspectives approach must do so carefully. One way to do so is via assessment strategies.

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Author Biography

Andrew Mearman is Subject Leader for Economics at Bristol Business School. He has published extensively in journals such as *Oxford Economic Papers*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* and the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, on teaching economics, economic methodology, heterodoxy in economics and recently on sustainability and economics.

Tim Wakeley has taught at the University of Bath, and Griffith University, Brisbane. He has pursued research in behavioural and evolutionary economics. Throughout his teaching career Tim has devoted his research work and teaching to the application of economic concepts to real world business issues. In

the summer of 2010 Tim left full-time academia and returned to the UK to pursue his lifelong ambition of self-employment. He is currently developing a subscriber-based online learning resource.

Don Webber is Professor of applied economics at the University of the West of England. Often adopting a quantitative approach, his main research interests lie at the intersection of regional and labour economics, and include drivers of spatial productivity patterns and 'softer' labour productivity enhancers, such as the quality of the work environment, cultural underpinnings of job satisfaction and choice under uncertainty.

Gamila Shoib is an Associate Fellow with the Information Systems and Management Group at the Warwick Business School, University of Warwick. Gamila obtained her Ph.D. in Information Systems from the University of Cambridge. She has worked at the Universities of Cambridge and Bath, and Griffith University, Australia. Her research has focused on the social and organisational aspects of Information Systems, Social Science approaches to research as well as learning and knowledge creation in organisations.

Contact details

Andrew Mearman
University of the West of England
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol
BS16 1QY
United Kingdom
Email: Andrew.Mearman@uwe.ac.uk