
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Don't know much about history, don't know much about economy...

Original Reporting | By Mike Alberti | Alternative models, Economy, Education

HOW TO REFORM THE CURRICULUM

This article is part of Remapping Debate's six-part series on the consequences of how economics is and is not taught to undergraduates in the United States. (See Parts [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#).)

Here, we examine changes that some critics are seeking in advanced offerings and in pedagogical methods.

The series concludes in two weeks with a probing look at what those who support or administer the status quo have to say.

— *Editor*

Mar. 8, 2012 — Remapping Debate recently reported on some of the ways that critics of the current model of economics education in the United States [believe that undergraduate programs can reform their introductory and intermediate level courses](#) could offer a greater diversity of perspective, more social and historical context, and an increased focus on the real economy. These critics are equally unsparing in assessing the adequacy of advanced course offerings. There are, they say, a host of topics and perspectives not available to be studied at many economics departments.

Geoffrey Schneider, a professor of economics at Bucknell University, said that advanced course offerings should be fertile ground for departments to focus on alternative perspectives. "That is where one hundred flowers could really bloom," he said. "Departments have a lot of opportunity at the advanced level to have discussions with students about what classes they would be most interested in taking."

For example, Steve Cohn, a professor of economics at Knox College, said that "real diversity would come from having upper level courses in other paradigms. You could have courses on Marxism, feminism, or institutionalism, for example, so students can get deep into the methodology of each paradigm."

"You would think that economists of all people would understand the need to differentiate your product," said Steve Zilliak, a professor of economics at Roosevelt University.

One roadblock: lack of breadth among faculty. "If you want to give a seminar on institutionalism, you need to have someone who has a solid knowledge of institutionalism," said Frederic Lee, a professor of economics at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. "Most departments don't have that, so they don't offer the courses."

Broadening still further

Schools that don't have separate public policy departments should also include more public policy courses at the advanced level, said John Harvey, a professor of economics at Texas Christian University. "If economics is the only place students are getting any policy studies, then we should all be doing a better job of making those courses available," he said. Some examples of more public policy oriented economics courses include classes in tax policy, welfare policy, public finance, health economics, and environmental economics, he said.

Additionally, Harvey said that programs should offer students variety not only in terms of the schools of thought they study, but also in terms of geography. "I think it's very beneficial for students if they can really get a sense that there are major differences in the way that different countries have structured their economies," he said. "We can learn a lot from looking at the differences between our economy and countries in Asia and Latin America."

Zilliak said that it is striking that students are rarely given a chance to study the ideas and theories of individual economic thinkers at the advanced level. "The advanced courses are the times when you could offer students a seminar in Keynes or Marx or Milton Friedman," he said. "I think a lot of students would find that interesting because you can see what ideas they were drawing from and what new insights they had. And from there you have a foundation to analyze how their theories have influenced others, and how they might have changed or become misrepresented."

"Programs that are trying to teach in a more pluralistic way already have a number of models and frameworks to draw from," said Julie Nelson of UMass Boston. "They don't need to start from scratch."

Peter Dorman, a professor of economics at Evergreen State University, said that students at the advanced level should also gain experience in finding and analyzing data, if they haven't already. "At that level, you can start saying, 'Okay, there's this theory out there, which you all know, that inflation depends entirely on the money supply. So now go download some data on inflation rates and the money supply and let's test it,'" he said.

Zilliak argues for going one step further. "Students should have to create their own data," he said. "They need to be able to design surveys or go through the historical record to collect data on their own... Only then do you really see that facts are complicated and they can mislead you."

Finally, several sources suggested that departments should offer more advanced courses on economic history, a category, like history of economic thought, that has largely fallen by the wayside in the last few decades. Daniel Macdonald, a graduate student in economics at the University of Massachusetts

Amherst and one of the authors of the blog [anti-mankiw](#), emphasized that students need a firm grounding in economic history so that they understand the context in which various branches of economics thought came about. “Something that students gain in those classes that they don’t get elsewhere is seeing that, first of all, all these ideas have depended on historical forces that we usually don’t think about,” he said. “And second of all, you see that there were other paths, that things could have gone a different way.”

Beyond “chalk-and-talk”

The charge that the economics major has become too narrow goes beyond course content and curriculum and extends into pedagogy. Many economists and educators stressed that the way in which a course is taught is nearly as important as the content of that course.

“There are all these voices out there that are competing to be heard,” said Steve Zilliak of Roosevelt University.

“We should be teaching students by making them participate in that dialogue instead of stifling them.”

[Surveys show](#) that there is a single pedagogical technique that predominates in undergraduate economics education in the United States. Known as “chalk-and-talk,” it consists of delivering a series of lectures, usually deviating little from the content that is set out in textbooks, during which students are encouraged to take notes, but not necessarily to participate.

Martha Starr, a professor of economics at American University, said that the “chalk-and-talk” technique often discourages students from asking questions or engaging in a critical dialogue about the ideas they are learning. “It’s been shown that chalk-and-talk is not a good way to make sure that students are engaging with different ideas,” she said. “Actually, I think it’s a great way to make sure that they aren’t.”

Chalk-and-talk, Starr asserted, “basically treats students as passive receptacles of economic knowledge,” and is “popular among mainstream professors because it’s the easiest way to make sure that students are memorizing the standard models without thinking too much about them.”

A related issue is the heavy reliance on textbooks, which Peter Dorman of Evergreen State University called “the single most important obstacle to reforming undergraduate education.”

Zilliak said that relying exclusively on a textbook-based, chalk-and-talk style of teaching is at odds with the way economics is supposed to work. “Economics is a conversation,” he said. “There are all these voices out there that are competing to be heard. We should be teaching students by making them participate in that dialogue instead of stifling them.” (See bottom box: “Does pluralism confuse students?”)

Other economists have suggested other techniques. For example, Schneider has created an activity that is designed to help students understand the issue of the living wage. Students began by interviewing the support staff at their university about their the work and living conditions. Meanwhile, they read the theoretical literature on the topic and researched the cost of living in the local community. At the end of the exercise, they debated among themselves and finally recommended a specific hourly wage that they believed would be just for the staff workers.

Does pluralism confuse students?

One of the most common criticisms levied against a pluralist pedagogy by economics professors seeking to defend the status quo is that teaching students multiple, competing perspectives on economics will confuse them and potentially dissuade them from continuing their study.

A prominent example of this view comes from John Siegfried, an emeritus professor of economics at Vanderbilt University and the Secretary-Treasurer of the American Economics Association. Siegfried, who has written widely about economics education, was also the primary author of the [Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics](#), a guide for what students should learn about economics in high school and before. Siegfried [has also argued](#) that the Voluntary Content standards should be used as the basis of the introductory level of undergraduate education. The Standards say that they

reflect the view of a large majority of economists today in favor of a “neoclassical model” of economic behavior...Including strongly held minority views of economic processes and concepts would have confused and frustrated teachers and students who would then be left with the responsibility of sorting the qualifications and alternatives without a sufficient foundation to do so.

Peter E. Earl, an associate professor of economics at the University of Queensland in Australia, has found that students who have had little exposure to a pluralistic pedagogy in the past do sometimes get confused and want the professor to give them the “right” answer. But Earl also found that he could reduce the confusion of students significantly simply by explaining to them what he was doing. “The transition from one level of intellectual development to another looks...likely to be quite painful, but if one explains to students what is going on, they seem to be far more receptive, particularly when they can see that in other parts of their lives they do tolerate, even enjoy, debate and ambiguity and can argue cases,” [Earl has written](#).

Steve Cohn of Knox College said that he finds it strange that potential confusion is used to justify one-sided instruction. “Saying that if there’s more than one approach you confuse students is a very odd position for a university to take,” he said. “They are here to be confused. Confusion is how you learn to think. I can’t imagine some of the other disciplines making the same argument. Can you imagine teaching philosophy where there’s only one view?”

Dorman said that, in order to teach students both the strengths and weaknesses of a modeling approach, he uses a game he calls “math charades” on the first day of class. Students are divided up into teams and each is given a “story,” such as a tomato farmer who is trying to determine when he should plant his tomatoes, or a politician trying to determine how many advertisements to use in a campaign. Each team is told to translate that story into a mathematical model, with constraints on how many words and pictures that can be used, and then the teams exchange models and try to guess what the stories of the other teams were. “Then they sit around and laugh,” Dorman said, “because they got some things wrong and some things right. And you can say that, really, what you’ve been doing in math charades is exactly what you do in economics. It’s just going back and forth between stories and math.”

“It’s been shown that chalk-and-talk is not a good way to make sure that students are engaging with different ideas” said Martha Starr of American University. “Actually, I think it’s a great way to make sure that they aren’t.”

Another way of making students engage emotionally with the subject matter is to teach the theoretical frameworks side-by-side with a work of literature through which those theories can be analyzed. For example, Zilliak teaches an introductory economics class for which he requires *The Grapes of Wrath* as a primary text. “It’s got everything in it,” he said. “There’s microeconomics, macroeconomics, questions of social justice, booms and busts. It’s a way of making the economy real for students.”

Reynold Nesiba, a professor of economics at Augustana College, said that it is also important to expose students to the methodology and insights of the other social sciences. “You can’t understand how the American economy works if you don’t have some American history. You can’t understand it without knowing some sociology and some politics and some moral philosophy.”

Nesiba said that cross-listing courses between departments and team-teaching them with faculty members from other disciplines can be an effective way to promote critical thinking skills. “Students can get such a rich experience out of hearing the way that two different disciplines think about the same issues,” he said.

“Economics is an inherently interdisciplinary field,” he went on. “We’ve moved away from that in our teaching, but I think we’ve reached the limits of what economics can do on its own, and we should be going back to the dialogue between schools of thought and different disciplines. That would be a remarkable environment for students to learn in.”

An opportunity for reform?

Individual economics programs wishing to experiment with a more diverse curriculum, said Julie Nelson, a professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts Boston, “don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

“Programs that are trying to teach in a more pluralistic way already have a number of models and frameworks to draw from,” she said. “They don’t need to start from scratch.”

Dorman emphasized a variety of institutional and cultural constraints that have, so far, prevented widespread reform of the economics curriculum. But he and many other advocates of pluralism believe that the current historical moment provides an opportunity to institute change that has not existed before.

“There’s been a wave of interest in this following the financial crisis,” Dorman said. “People are starting to recognize that the [conventional] models don’t capture everything and to ask if there needs to be a change in the way that economics is taught. It’s important to capitalize on that interest.”

This content originally appeared at <http://www.remappingdebate.org/node/1146>