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Death of the Pedagogue: Pluralism and Non-didacticism

ABSTRACT

Contest and controversy; orthodoxy and heterodoxy; critique and reject: how can economics curricula be adjusted to illustrate the multiplicity of, frequently antagonistic, explanations for observed phenomena? This paper commences by addressing the meaning of pluralism within the rubric of Foucault and Barthes, proposing that the application of pluralism in economics is a more complex process than has previously been acknowledged. It posits that the emphasis falls too often on pedagogical issues that re-affirm hierarchical teacher-learner relationships which hinder learner autonomy and encourages the transmission of teacher bias. Arguing that the economics instructor should instead act as an enlightened navigator, it addresses the practical aspects of delivery by exploring two key modules in undergraduate degree provision: intermediate microeconomics and the dissertation.

Key Words: Assessment Practices; Student-centred Learning; Curriculum Design; Intermediate Microeconomics; Dissertations; Foucault; Barthes.

1. Introduction

As described purposely by Denis (2009, 7), Economics is a discipline that is comprised of “*not one but many sciences of economics*”. Economists do not think alike. There are multiple schools of thought, regularly producing inconsistent stories as explanation for economic phenomena. The student therefore should realise that economics cannot be understood through the adoption of one perspective. It is by comparing and contrasting various economic schools of thought, whilst engaging with related disciplines in the social sciences, that economists can be creative in their enquiry. Given this, there is no justification to teach economics as if a consensus exists. Such an assumption would seemingly serve no purpose and result only in the student being deprived of the rich debate within the discipline. In short, a pluralist teaching approach -whereby the instructor and learner consider the different ways of understanding economic phenomena- is seen as the natural outcome which all economics education should pursue.

We therefore have to ask why, given these apparent advantages, the debate between monism and pluralism is still on-going? Neoclassical economics continues to dominate undergraduate curricula and pluralist techniques are often relegated to specific sub-disciplines. For some, this reflects constraints imposed on the higher education sector. Wilson and Dixon (2009, 98), for example, highlight the consequences of the targeting of research:

“The targeting of research...made a more liberal, pluralistic approach to the provision of undergraduate economics seem to many in the academy a luxury that could no longer be afforded.”

Pedagogical developments, according to this viewpoint, are driven by simple concerns over opportunity costs. With research central to the academic’s career progression, there is an incentive to adopt a less sophisticated programme design with core orthodox curricula reiterated again and again through-out individual module provision. This approach is often preferred by academics that prioritise concise formal representation through mathematical formulae, as they frequently seek the most convenient avenue to minimise learning and teaching workloads.

In contrast, rather than referring to the evolution of economics as a result of general higher education developments, we could highlight the characteristics of the individual academic. Freeman (2009, 24) notes that, for economics, *“pluralism has been misrepresented as a synonym for heterodoxy”*. How can we explain this tendency to blur the definition of two distinct terms? Are there perhaps characteristics specific to Economics that could make pluralist methods more difficult to apply? This paper offers an insight into such imprecision by inspecting the discipline through the lens of Foucault and Barthes. It posits that it is the

pursuit of an inadequate and obsolete economic pedagogy that has limited the delivery of pluralism. We will show that the notion of a ‘pluralist pedagogue’ is a paradox, representing a contradiction in terms. Whilst the pedagogue represents the old-fashioned, autocratic teacher, the development of pluralism is innately limited. For it to evolve fully requires a fundamental shift in the relationship between academic and student. The instructor must cede his hierarchical position and become the enlightened navigator. In the next section we defend this position. This is then succeeded by two case studies offered with two purposes in mind: to elaborate on the specific characteristics presented by a pluralist economic education and to illustrate what is meant by an enlightened navigator. Innovative assessment should be placed at the heart of a successfully pluralist education, shifting the emphasis placed on the ‘teacher’ as distributor onto the students themselves. Thus, pluralism is not simply about curriculum design but also the mode of teaching. These concepts are typically discussed separately, rather than being suitably integrated.

2. Why haven’t we achieved more?

Economics is not a recent convert to the incorporation of pluralism in its teaching philosophy. There exists a vibrant literature which comprehensively considers the consequences for curriculum design (e.g. Earl, 2003; Mearman, 2007; Denis, 2009; Garnett & Reardon, 2011). However, more often than not this literature -explicitly or implicitly- endorses the view that there can be a sliding scale of pluralist applications. Denis (2009, 11), for example, makes a distinction between permissive and assertive forms in the depth of pluralist outcome: i.e. “*the difference between tolerating diversity and embracing diversity*”. Mearman (2012) essentially supports this approach by remarking that “*different types of pluralism generate different types of effects*”. While the idea of this sliding scale is arguably philosophically ambiguous, its perceived existence should make the practical delivery of pluralist

perspectives more of a straight-forward proposition than it has proved to be. It should encourage the dismissal of claims that there are external constraints to the uptake of pluralism in economics. One such claim, made in the UK where our case studies are conducted, is given by Wilson and Dixon (2009, 98):

“The targeting of research, in the form of the RAE [Research Assessment Exercise], made a more liberal, pluralistic approach to the provision of undergraduate economics seem to many in the academy a luxury that could no longer be afforded.”

Given the apparent simplicity of applying even the most basic level of pluralism, blaming institutional arrangements (and subsequent concerns over career progression) for any economic reliance on a monist perspective is difficult to defend. We therefore have to ask why pluralist methods are not more habitual. In this paper our explanation is based on lessons learnt from Foucault and Barthes, using their writings to appreciate the peculiar aspects of economics which have made pluralism more difficult to deliver.

Foucault in 1967, when pluralism was controversially staking its claim on the way we organise knowledge and understand its progression, wrote:

“Concerning those large groups of statements with which we are so familiar – and which we call medicine, economics, or grammar – I have asked myself on what their unity could be based. On a full tightly packed, continuous, geographically well-defined field of objects? What appeared to me were rather series full of gaps, intertwined with one another, interplays of differences distances, substitutions, transformations. On a definite, normative type of statement? I found formulations of levels that were much too different and functions that were much too heterogeneous to be linked together and arranged in a single figure, and to simulate, from one period to another, beyond individual œuvres, a sort of great uninterrupted text.”

In summary, this points to how pluralism can be seen as the necessary product of a contested space in which competing, often antagonistic, voices/stances exist side by side. It is the natural state of post-modernity, where controversy and dispute, contradiction and absence necessarily undermine notions of orthodoxy and absolute truths. Thus pluralism, rather than being a posture that one adopts, should really refer to the liberated intellectual space which accommodates differing voices without any single one dominating at the expense of the others. However, economics as an academic discipline is an outlier for permitting one school of thought -neoclassical economics- to take such a dominant role in discourse. Confronted with this bias in favour of a particular approach to economics, this has encouraged a reactionary tendency to simply criticise the validity of the mainstream. Consider, for example, Keen (2009, 143). In discussing the application of pluralism to intermediate microeconomics, he makes the following claim:

“This is a demanding course, but one I find students respond well to. At its end, students have a very deep and critical understanding of neoclassical microeconomics, and the beginning of a vision of what a heterodox alternative might be.”

The phrasing of this statement could be easily interpreted as a technical assault on the validity of the orthodox approach in order to promote a subjectively superior ‘alternative’. It encourages the view that to teach with a pluralist perspective you also have to be focused on delivering the heterodox alternative. This is a time consuming endeavour and could result in the unfortunate outcome that pluralism becomes the hobbyhorse of a sub-set of academics with very particular backgrounds. Stillwell (2006, 48), for example, acknowledges that pluralism is typically perceived to be the domain of academics sympathetic to left wing politics:

“Given that the dominant economic orthodoxy currently has such a strong association with the political practices of neoliberalism, the advocacy of pluralism has an obvious association with the politics of the left. The case for pluralism, from this perspective, has a counterhegemonic rationale, challenging the theoretical underpinnings of neoliberal ideology and policies”

Consider now the application of Barthes (1968) to the education of economics. An additional issue which discourages the practical delivery of pluralism is the tendency to rely on the textbook. Used without imagination, the archetypal textbook can encourage narrow teaching methods and elicit equally limited responses from students who are inevitably happy to be told ‘the answer’ even if it is open to question. When Barthes proclaimed the death of the author, he implicitly waged war against such authoritarian treatises as these as much as he exposed the inhibited ways in which we read. Plurality emerges as a necessary state in which there is no one singular text because the reader, in his/her difference, proliferates that text every time it is read. More than one reader necessarily multiplies this proliferation and means that the interpretation becomes harder to quantify and certainly more difficult to order. Once we allow for the possibility of multiple interpretations, a traditional textbook becomes an increasingly inadequate teaching tool. However, particularly for core theoretical modules, economics teaching is heavily reliant on recommended textbooks. This immediately dictates and constrains the role of the teacher who, like the book, becomes unquestioned, unquestionable, and certainly un-Barthian. Students are directed towards a ‘truth’ which encourages an approach to their subject with few self-conscious reflexes, and limited ability to interrogate or understand their own situation in relation to it. The author/teacher is always right and the student’s role is follow.

So Foucault and Barthes have facilitated the highlighting of two very specific obstacles to practically applying pluralism in economics. How are these obstacles overcome? How do we

avoid the creation of a binary opposition between the orthodox and heterodox? How do we relieve the teacher of the textbook and of the limitations that it implicitly places on their intellectual relationship with the student? We argue that, rather than focusing on curriculum design, it is mostly in rigorously planned assessment that pluralism can be effectively freed. Reliance on curriculum design is always going to be difficult because of the extent and variety of economic analysis. The lecturer is unable to explore all the multifarious stances and interpretations of the material within the confines of traditional modes of teaching. However, carefully devised assessment can provide the student with the space and the support with which to develop the skills to navigate the increasingly plural discipline independently. In this environment the textbook is demoted to reference text rather than teaching tool and all are liberated from the restrictions imposed by the old fashioned teacher-student dynamic imposed by 'textbook-based' teaching. As Barthes writes, '*a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination*', and the same can be said of teaching. The student is equipped not only with knowledge but skills acquired by becoming a more involved 'reader' of economics.

3. Case Studies

Undergraduate economics provision is relatively homogeneous. Although there are variances in compulsories and the credit weightings allocated to individual modules, there is a mainstay diet of mainstream economic theory and mathematical/statistical support. Greater intellectual freedom is then increasingly permitted, with a shift towards optional modules after two years of being taught the core monist economic approach. Given this environment, what possible mechanisms could be pursued to accommodate pluralism within the design of economics undergraduate provision? Broadly speaking, previous literature on pluralism has explored

two specific concerns: module design and pedagogic development. Before referring to the implications of our approach to course design, we will suggest that both concerns are consistent with our view that pluralism is really yet to be fully pushed within economics.

Module design is primarily governed by the practicalities of structuring the curriculum without risking the delivery of specific learning outcomes. How many schools of thought can actually be introduced to the student when discussing an economic problem-based issue? This can be a crucial dilemma. For example, Siegried and Meszaros (1997, 249) note that too much complexity too soon “*risks undermining the entire venture...with too many qualifications and alternatives [so that] teachers and their students may abandon economics entirely out of frustration born of confusion and uncertainty*”. Whilst some research suggests that these issues may be overstated (e.g. Stilwell, 2011; McIntyre and van Horn, 2011), the debate will often focus on what level of study pluralism should be introduced. A more stable environment, where standard neoclassical textbooks are used, could be considered desirable for introductory economic theory. Alternative perspectives, within this continued notion of a sliding scale of pluralism, could then be utilised at intermediate and advanced levels. The argument being that in more focused analysis, partial truths can be avoided. Others, however, suggest that there is little reason for such a delay and that it is possible to develop existing pluralist approaches from the very beginning. Mearman (2012), for example, highlights how introductory macroeconomics is already taught in terms of history and conflict; thus exhibiting how students are already able to embrace ambiguity and contention. Earl (2003, 93) also suggests that:

“the dominance of mainstream economics in the first year [of university studies] locks students’ expectations into continued faith in dualistic modes of learning about economics, making pluralistic teaching at intermediate and advanced levels more of a struggle.”

This debate however, seems superfluous to pluralism. Measuring the extent of pluralism merely results in the pedagogue becoming dictator of the student experience. He restricts freedom when he deems it appropriate and, when he's happy with the student's progress and ability to understand his argument, he embraces alternative perspectives to dismiss the stances that he finds wanting. Pluralism, if it is used within economics, cannot be restricted to levels of study or types of module. It cannot be manipulated at will to service particular requirements. It is either implemented through-out the economic education experience or it risks just becoming a buzz-word for the lone academic trying to independently accentuate the student experience and his own radical status.

Second, there is an attempt to employ the 'scale of pluralism' to illustrate how the economics curricula can be broadened. The lower range of pluralist activity will typically highlight the individual lecturer, or cabal of the like-minded, who are willing to integrate the various perspectives available within sub-disciplines taught on our standard economic programmes. The higher range, in contrast, recommends the need for a form of benchmarking that favours pluralism at a programme level. This often commences with the demand that modules such as the history of economic thought should be a foundation stone in the design of economics programmes. This is an admirable start. Indeed, re-examining the past history of ideas is consistent with Foucault who also alludes to Pierre Machery's 'The Text Says What it Does Not Say' in which silences speak louder than the words themselves and what has been articulated is merely foil for what has been suppressed. Dow (2009, 48), highlighting the importance of a history of economic thought context, writes:

"History of thought can be studied for its own sake, as intellectual history, and indeed it is out of such detailed archival work that the body of knowledge in history of thought emerges. But study of this history of thought is also important as part of a

pluralist education. First we get away from the idea that there is one best interpretation of past ideas (as of current ideas), the history of our subject opens up.”

The progression of Dow’s argument and the terminology alludes directly to Foucault, echoing his method of questioning the unities of accepted knowledge. However, this idea of a radical change in benchmarking fails to focus on the limitations associated with the pedagogue. Despite Freeman’s (2009) plea that this is not about replacing one monotheoretic paradigm with another, we are left with the heterodox scrambling at the margins to voice their discontent with the current curriculum design. The teacher as autocrat reiterating an accepted order is maintained; the shackles on what he can teach are simply loosened. The structures he operates within remain intact.

The commentary so far has not prioritised the view that there needs to be radical curricula re-design, facilitated by a re-writing of economics benchmarking. Rather, it is role of the teacher as pedagogue that requires attention. To advertise this idea of how pluralism can be liberated by redefining the role of the teacher, we will examine the practicalities involved in the design of two specific modules: Intermediate Microeconomics and the Dissertation Module. Both are offered as illustrations of the fact that, for pluralism to subsist within a learning environment, assessment methods are vital. These assessment methods are designed to locate the instructor as a guiding figure, who rather than enforcing pluralism mediates it. The Intermediate Microeconomics module is presented to indicate that lecture design is not the solution to delivering critical reasoning skills to the students. The Dissertation Module is then proffered to highlight how reflective and collaborative learning can be enabled without the oppressive control of the academic.

(i) Intermediate Microeconomics

Intermediate Microeconomics typically adopts a standard curriculum. It will often start with a vague separation of analysis between two types of economic agents: the consumer and the firm. Similar mathematical tools will be used to explain how these economic agents behave, using the assumption of rationality to derive an understanding of general equilibrium and welfare. This will then allow discussion of numerous potential barriers to the delivery of economic efficiency: imperfect competition, externalities, public goods and asymmetric knowledge problems. There is therefore a tendency to see Intermediate Microeconomics as simply a “diagram plus” experience, where the analysis into Introductory Microeconomics is repeated with more complexity. One reaction to this regimentation, particularly as a rejection of its monist nature, is to attempt the inclusion of heterodox content. As described in Mearman (2007), there are three common strategies: an orthodox-plus approach; replacing the orthodox analysis but shifting towards a heterodox perspective; and adopting a ‘compare and contrast’ parallel perspectives approach. There will likewise be a key choice over the textbook chosen by the instructor. A good example of a text that allows comparison of schools of thought is Himmelweit *et al.* (2001), offering comparison of neoclassical and institutionalist perspectives to enable the student to appraise elements of orthodox microeconomic analysis. A more radical departure is Elsner (2012). This book offers an evolutionary perspective and pitches itself as an ideal ‘non-toxic’ choice. The idea of toxic textbooks originates from the post-autistic economics movement. They did not hold back in terms of their disapproval for the current textbooks on offer:

“Every year these “mainstream” books serve to indoctrinate millions of students in a quaint ideology (perfect rationality of economic agents, market efficiency, the invisible hand, etc.) cunningly disguised as science. This mass miseducation deprives society of the moral and intellectual capacities it needs in order to design and maintain the support systems required by market economies.”

The obvious concern here is that this is really just a call for the replacement of one orthodox with a preferred intellectually superior alternative. To avoid such binary oppositions that potentially undermine pluralism, it is therefore arguably better to adopt a parallel approach, often shifting from a topic-based to problem-based approach.

The primary problem encountered by the instructor will be time constraints. The call to cover alternative paradigms can provoke the anxieties of ambiguity detailed earlier, where constraints are so severe that students become dispirited as breadth necessarily overpowers depth and they flounder in superficial content with little more than superficial references as inadequate entrances to complex schools of thought. Consider, for example, the issue of market power. The orthodox position will typically build on a basic 'big is bad' outlook. Analysis generally commences by confirming the extent of deadweight loss. Critique of that approach is then only provided by the shift from a static outlook to a dynamic one that introduces innovation. There is then only a negligible ambiguity as the student is required to question the extent to which market power harms the innovation process. To proceed any further demands answering a vital question: which alternatives should be considered? Is it sufficient to simply compare the orthodox approach with a heterodox alternative such as Schumpeterian 'creative destruction'? For pluralism to genuinely exist and not merely be acknowledged in passing there should be references to multiple other issues. Perhaps this would begin with reference to how new institutionalism can be used to strengthen neoclassical stance. It may also include business history analysis, such as Chandlerian analysis which provides a compelling link between organisational and technical innovations. There is also room for more general analysis into innovation theory, providing a plethora of approaches that could arguably fill a module's curriculum by themselves. There is simply too much material to cover and the instructor will be forced to deliberately restrict it, thus making a selective choice that silences the remainder and possibly reflects his own biases.

There are learning methods which can reduce the impact of these choices. One used extensively is ‘flipping the classroom’. Championed by Walvoord and Anderson (1998), this promotes the idea of flipping home study and lecture time. Originally this endorsed a pre-lecture assignment, where students provide work prior to the lecture and receive feedback through the classroom activities. The idea is straight-forward: the classroom can be focused on synthesizing, analysing and problem-solving. Within the framework of a study of economics (e.g. Lage *et al.* 2000; Mazur and Crouch 2001) there is a focus on providing the material traditionally given in the lecture beforehand. This will often be technologically based, such as the use of screencasts which cover the material covered in the orthodox textbook. The lecture is then freed to focus on more conceptual questions. Technology will often also be used within these lectures, such as the use of student response systems to ensure a more interactive ‘debating’ environment. Such a format arguably suits the pluralist agenda. There is no need to reiterate the orthodox position in the lecture. Pre-lecture videos detailing this position can, within the lecturing environment, be compared with alternative approaches. The student can therefore be offered choice and the interactive systems can be used to encourage students to critique and, where necessary, dismiss.

Does this ‘flipping the classroom’ approach work? There is growing evidence that it can indeed produce significant learning gains (Deslauriers *et al.* 2011). In particular, shifting away from ‘talk and chalk’ can significantly improve student engagement. For the interests of pluralism, however, the combination of pre-lecture videos with lectures designed to focus on the debate within the discipline can ensure a structured learning environment which avoids claims of superficial delivery. In addition, consider the quote from Bransford *et al.* (2000, 18):

“A ‘metacognitive’ approach to instruction can help students learn to take control of their own learning by defining learning goals and monitoring their progress in achieving them”

Thus, by ensuring an environment where the student is able to question the orthodox and heterodox approaches in an environment where there is open dialogue between herself and the instructor, they are able to recognise how the debate is furthering their understanding of the various economic approaches.

Despite the undoubted gains to be had from ‘flipping the classroom’ and how this can eliminate student disengagement from a module often seen as just adding complexity to introductory theory, our earlier analysis now exposes the shortcoming: this process is not actually delivering pluralism. It is merely a structured means of questioning the orthodox position. Even with these ‘flipping’ techniques, there are still severe constraints on what can be covered. Except in very specific problem-based exercises, the instructor will still be forced to dictate which theoretical concepts will be covered and which will be ignored. This creates an outcome which should be alien to the pluralist agenda: the student is simply being encouraged to accept that the instructor’s theoretical preferences are appropriate. For pluralism to be liberated we therefore propose that this ‘flipping’ approach to teaching must be combined with careful use of assessment. Here, we argue that the attention must be shifted away from the instructor and towards peer review.

The importance of assessment feedback has been raised by numerous pedagogical sources. Brown (2007), for example, calls feedback *“...the oil that lubricates the cogs of understanding”*. We propose that, for pluralism within an intermediate microeconomics context, this feedback should also involve peer review. Peer review, although undoubtedly a powerful feedback mechanism, is often focused on the evaluation of individual student

contributions within team-based assessment. It can, however, provide a crucial means to support the student's learning experience. Consider, for example, the use of peer review across students at different levels of study: i.e. Year 3 or 4 students helping Year 2 students in their Intermediate Microeconomics study. Rather than merely commenting on what has been achieved, Year 3 students can also provide suggestions for what is missing or what could be done next. It is therefore a process through which Year 2 students can acquire essential feedback on how to improve their work prior to the submission of their assignments. Students are able to use their experience to pass on knowledge to students at lower levels of study.

We propose that this peer review provides also a means to significantly aid the pluralist agenda. In particular, rather than inter-level peer review, we propose inter-discipline (and even inter-university) interactions. The only constraint on these interactions is that there is some common ground over learning outcomes. For example, consider the impact of union bargaining on labour market outcome. Theoretical study will start by understanding the determinants of labour supply and labour demand. This will allow documentation of proposed disemployment effects but also show, through the introduction of the various sources of monopsony, how the trade union can increase both wages and employment. All of these aspects can be discussed in full in the 'flipping' environment. However, by adding peer review with students in other disciplines (politics, industrial relations, human resource management etc.), the influence of the single authoritative instructor on the conclusion can be reduced. The student is confronted by students with different perspectives who have encountered material provided to them by an alternative instructor, often who have very different research backgrounds. This provides a forum for the mutual exchange of compatible knowledge across the different student populations. It allows students to consider the different tools and techniques used in the alternative discipline, providing a means to further

assist student understanding and interpretation. The instructor, within this process, necessarily becomes a guide within an assessment system which promotes student critical appraisal skills and encourages the idea of fungible knowledge, where the student is able to understand how their academic specific knowledge can be applied to more general topics. To borrow the words of Foucault, the teacher becomes a ‘node in a network’, and this takes on a more pertinent meaning when one considers that it is indeed internet based.

(ii) The Dissertation Module

The pluralist commitment to the learner’s intellectual autonomy naturally encourages the support for the undergraduate dissertation. Consider, for example, Ethridge’s (2004) summary of the basic research methods that are applied in the learner’s pursuit of a dissertation:

- Interdisciplinary Research: *“Thus, while economics is a separate discipline much of what we eventually do with it -its applications- become multidisciplinary subject matter work.”*
- Problem-solving Research: *“Problem-solving Research is designed to solve a specific problem for a specific decision maker. [It] often results in prescriptions or recommendation on decisions or actions.”*

The learner is immersed in the discovery of open-ended ideas and, through their willingness to undertake semi-autonomous enquiry, they embrace the ideal of ‘thinking like an economist’. However, there are two hazards that require consideration when liberating what has become the pluralist agenda. First, there are continued concerns over the methodology which is being enforced; particularly with the focus on technical analysis encouraging a quantitative approach which then relegates qualitative study as a second-rate alternative.

Second, as with other aspects of delivery, we have to consider the instructor-student hierarchy; in particular, the role of supervision within the dissertation writing experience.

To introduce our concerns over the research methodology typically encouraged in economic dissertation study, consider the following quote from Lazear (2000, 99):

“Economics is not only a social science, it is a genuine science. Like the physical sciences, economics uses a methodology that produces refutable implications and tests these implications using solid statistical techniques.”

Thus, compared to the other social sciences, the economist’s ability to quantify and to evade insipid conclusion is considered crucial to their value; a value which, rather than encouraging the economist to learn from the other social sciences, will lead to orthodox economic study increasingly dominating the discourse.

This position is incompatible with pluralism. This is not to say that empirical investigation should somehow be ignored. Indeed, it is the indecisiveness of the empirical process and the continued hypothetical importance of multiple stances which first encouraged pluralism in economics (Caldwell 1982). However, it does arguably highlight that an inflexible estimation of the importance of empirical investigation will skew learning towards an analytical outlook which necessitates that the dissertation author is focused entirely on delivering the single correct answer. As discussed in Garnett and Reardon (2012), this can be to the detriment of critical thinking (“making judgments in the context of uncertainty”). Indeed, there is arguably a fundamental conflict that complicates the movement towards pluralism in economics that is created by the very fact that economists convey meaning using both numbers and words. These are inherently different vehicles. Numbers cannot be plural. Individually they hold no inherent ambiguities. They are a-historical, cannot convey emotion, contain trauma or hold

biases. They are not subject to the difficulties of translation and are not touched by cultural or national differences. They do not evolve or change with time. Certain numbers do not fall out of use or mean differently according to location and/or time. A single number is always what it is. Words are nowhere near as fixed in the way they communicate meaning and yet it is with language that we describe patterns in a group of numbers. With these unstable words we attempt to fix an absolute meaning. This is the paradox that surely necessitates that the economist be pluralistic in his responses, for to abstain from pluralism would surely require that language be silent and numbers left to stand alone and speak for themselves.

At the very least this demands a shift in the research methods prioritised for to the undergraduate student. Numerical formulae should not automatically be given precedence; applied econometric work should not automatically be marked higher than the ability to manage and measure conflicting and extensive ideas discursively. To allow such a result is assuredly a limitation of pluralism and another manner of advancing monism by indicating ‘one methodology, one truth’.

We now turn to our second issue: the role of the supervisor. The pluralist agenda’s focus on intellectual autonomy should encourage a skills-set which stimulates elevated levels of thinking. In Garnett’s (2009, 63) words, the learner is “*propelled to each higher stage by the realisation that the subject matter ‘encompasses meaningful uncertainty’*”. However, inherently within the term supervision there is the risk of over-direction and restriction. To Smith in the Economic Network’s Handbook for Economics Lecturers, “*the provision of good supervision is crucial to the success of the dissertation*”. Todd *et al.* (2004), referring to periods of ‘chaos’ and ‘cosmos’, argue that supervision is vital to the process of smoothing

the transition to self-directed learning. However, Lea and Street (1998, 169) note the following:

“There is a dynamic within the feedback genre, for instance, which works both to construct academic knowledge and to maintain relationships of power and authority between novice student and experienced academic.”

This hierarchical relationship can therefore stunt student empowerment, with the success of the dissertation ultimately depending on the extent that the student has listened and can replicate the arguments provided by the academic.

It is this potential problem that encouraged us to eliminate the supervisor from the equation. Instead, we adopt a system which celebrates a collaborative environment where students themselves are at the centre of discovery-based learning. Thus, dissertation support groups are constructed with students investigating independent, but related research questions. These groups are directed by the students themselves, whilst the academic acts as a mentor who strictly plays only a guiding role. These groups will typically only meet their mentors in half of the meetings. The un-mentored meetings are for productive and genial exchange governed by the following principles: to solicit comments on their research ideas and progress, to seek suggestions for improvement; to brainstorm ideas relating to both conceptual and practical aspects of their research; sharing ideas to help formulate an appropriate research design and methodology, involving constructive but critical review of their analysis; seeking constructive solutions to any difficulties that they are encountering; and collectively agreeing an agenda to take to the next mentored group meeting. Mentored group meetings are thus student driven and structured to address the issues that have previously been ‘thrashed out’ and collated in peer-group meetings. Through this framework the students receive the

external guidance required to meet their research objectives without retreating to or needing to recreate the ‘supervisory boss’ that is encouraged by traditional dissertation methods.

4. Concluding Remarks

Pluralism is more than just a reference to multiple schools of thought. It is more than merely a tool for critiquing neoclassical economics and for promoting heterodox alternatives. Encouraging the notion that there is a sliding scale in pluralist activity, the debate surrounding this issue has been too restrained by the perceived boundaries of the classroom and too driven by the need to promote certain heterodoxies above others. This paper posits that there can be no selective form of pluralism and focuses on the realisation that the problem within economics is not the constraints imposed on learning and teaching; be it the need to achieve publication success for career progression or perceived limitations in the benchmarking used in programme design. This paper addresses two problems we believe to be pivotal to the matter. Using Foucault and Barthes, we highlight the difficulties in applying pluralism to economics. The focus on quantitative analysis, typically billed as a means to continuously test the validity of theory, actually constrains how economic comment is understood. This discourages evolutionary change and instead encourages paradigm shocks, as economic analysis lurches from one ‘accepted understanding’ to another. This in turn generates the second problem: the nature of the pedagogue. The existing role of the teacher immediately encourages a subjectivity which encourages the learner to simply take on the biases of their instructor. Pluralism is then not achieved, with the reality being merely a reiteration of the former teacher-student dynamic as heterodox economists attempt to undermine and disempower the neoclassical orthodox.

This paper, arguing in favour of the pluralist agenda, has provocatively called for the elimination of pedagogue. The rationale is simple: for learner autonomy there must be a shift away from the hierarchical relationship between academic and student. We have advertised this through a summary of two modules where student collaboration is the key aspect. The death of the author is then not just a rejection of the ‘toxic’ economics textbook which constrains dialogue to the orthodox theory. It is also a call for the replacement of the dictatorial teacher with the non-didactic navigator/guide who supports student autonomy and the genuine choices that are available within the extensive and various resources of economic analysis.

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