



## Strategies for Changing Economics Teaching

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### Summary

- 1) Create alternative teaching materials – books, web-based materials – then get them adopted:  
encourage heterodox economists to spread the word,  
e.g. asking their librarians to order pluralist or alternative books
  - 2) Where change will/can take place:
    - 2.a) From within existing economics departments
      - invitations from students to speakers on behavioral economics, etc.
      - pressure from the university administration
      - research on topics that will clarify the need and the demand for teaching new economic thinking, at individual universities (e.g., Willamette) or nation-wide (PEPS in France)
    - 2.b) Infiltrate other existing disciplines, such as geography, planning, sociology, political science, etc.
    - 2.c) Create parallel but “alternative” economics departments, e.g., Political Economy
  - 3) Focus on people who will be teaching economics in future; grad students, beginning teachers
    - 3.a) note that not all who are not seeking change are necessarily hostile; common ground may be found by addressing their concerns
    - 3.b) conferences to bring together proponents of new economic thinking
    - 3.c) place-based systems of support for teachers outside the mainstream
    - 3.d) geographically disparate groups can communicate via email, Skype, or chat rooms
    - 3.e) on-line resources
    - 3.f) training in pedagogical methods
  - 4) Allies in the battle for ideas
    - 4.a) student groups
    - 4.b) potential allies outside of universities: Employers; Activists; People who are helping to create some part of the “New Economy”
  - 5) Economics education within the New Economy movement
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## 1) Alternative teaching materials

If you want to change what is taught in economics courses, the essential starting place is educational materials – especially textbooks and web-based materials. However, the “build it and they will come” approach is slow. If we hope to get different materials adopted and used any time soon, a strategy is needed to make their availability known, and to get past the reluctance many teachers have to undertake serious revision of their course content. That is what this talk will be about – the different elements of such a strategy.

In devising this focus I’m benefitting from the ideas of many other people, including three who were on a panel I moderated at the New Economy Coalition conference in June<sup>1</sup> and people who responded to a report from that panel with additional ideas. The latter included post-graduates who have shared their doctoral dissertations with me. One of these was Tim Thornton, whose doctoral thesis was about economics textbooks. He wrote me an email saying:

“I think the Political Economy/Heterodox Economics community has a responsibility to get behind your books [*Micro and Macro Economics in Context*]. Even if PE/HE staff are not teaching first-year they should be in a position where they can order both books for their university library AND OR request review copies, and email your flyer to whoever teaches first-year economics suggesting they consider your text and that the books themselves are already in the library or in your direct possession.”

In the last 20 years or so there has arisen a healthy menu of choice among alternative teaching materials for the introductory “Principles of Economics” courses. There is certainly room for improvement and for new ideas here, while if you are teaching intermediate or advanced level Principles you do not have nearly as good a selection of teaching materials. But it is reasonable to start with a focus on the introductory courses because a much larger portion of the population take those than are influenced by other courses in economics. Thus I and my colleagues are ready to turn part of our focus from the teaching materials to the people doing the teaching, and the academic and social contexts within which they are working.

## 2) Where change will/can take place

One of the knottiest questions is where – in what institutional context – we should put our efforts in trying to bring about a more realistic and relevant approach to teaching economics?

2. a) One approach is to try to change the thinking within existing departments. Efforts in this direction can be discouraging; they need to be undertaken very strategically. Later I will talk about what can sometimes be a confrontational approach, but here I will just report on an

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<sup>1</sup> The panelists were

- Helen Scharber, assistant professor of economics at Hampshire College, who is also a staff economist for the Center for Popular Economics.
- Keith Harrington, a recent graduate of the economics masters degree program at the New School for Social Research, and a co-founder of the International Student Initiative for Pluralist Economics, and
- Jigar Bhatt, a PhD student at Columbia University where he studies economists – their ideas and methods – and how they influence our social and built environment.

experience I had as a graduate student which gave me some optimism about the potential for gentle mind-broadening. Frustrated by the lack of attention to environmental issues in the curriculum at Boston University, where I was taking my doctorate, I and my friends invited three distinguished environmentalists to give talks on what economists need to know about environmental issues. Since these lectures weren't required by any course few students attended, but more faculty did, and it actually made a difference in their later thinking and teaching.

I learned two things from this; first, that senior academics are very responsive to requests from students, even if there is no honorarium and they need to cover their own travel. Second, your own faculty are more likely to pay attention to a series of lectures – something that shows real effort and seriousness on the part of students – as contrasted, for example, with just a single invited lecture. As an example of what is possible, you might invite a series of speakers to discuss behavioral economics and its implications for the foundations of neoclassical economics.

Tom Green, in his 2012 doctoral thesis for the University of British Columbia, expressed the hopes that innovative university presidents, with a commitment to sustainability, will see that the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century demand very different content in economics courses – thus pinning his hope on academic forces outside of economics departments.

One promising way to promote this is through research on topics that will clarify the need and the demand for teaching new economic thinking. Economics faculties, as well as their institutions' administrators, would benefit from knowing the answers to questions such as the following:

- What is the probability that students in intro courses will go on to become economics majors?
- What elements of the standard content and methods are actually useful – and to which students? E.g., what should be taught to students who are majoring in economics, and what is the most useful set of ideas and methods for the much larger group of students who just take one or a few economics courses?
- What is especially needed for students who will go on to business majors? (For many other majors, such as Planning, a specialized intro to econ is often tailored especially for those students.)
- And – How do the students feel about their economics education?

Such a study could address the question of how to add new elements into a curriculum, such as an understanding of economic history, or the interactions between economic activity and the natural world, etc. Many teachers worry about adding anything when it is already hard to get through the whole syllabus planned for a course. A deep analysis of the standard content of economics curricula should encourage pruning out elements that are not going to be useful or relevant to students, now or in the future, as well as elements that are increasingly revealed to be contrary to fact. Without such legitimization, faculty feel insecure about removing any of the expected, standard elements.

Research on the situation in existing economics curricula could be undertaken for a single institution as was done at Willamette University in 2013: One of their conclusions was that few

students taking intro courses continued in economics – so they have drastically revised the intro courses.

In individual institutions, if the econ department doesn't want to take this on, graduate students could organize to ask questions such as: What is the institution's self-image? How does this map onto what is being taught in the economics department? They could identify departmental gaps and capabilities as well as potential bottlenecks to desired reform. More ambitiously, a program could be established to undertake such research across the whole of the United States – as has been done with considerable success by *PEPS-economie* in France.

2. b, c) Creating change within existing departments continues, however, to be a difficult project. Tim Thornton, in his 2013 doctoral thesis (La Trobe University, Australia) proposes two alternatives: infiltrate other existing disciplines, such as geography, planning, sociology, political science, etc.; or create parallel but “alternative” economics departments. Tim is working to create a Political Economy department within his university's social sciences faculty – or might wind up teaching pluralist economics within the existing Political Science department.

This discussion gets into complex issues of university politics – an area that most people would prefer to avoid! But there are important potentials that should be explored here, especially when it seems impossible to alter an existing economics department. At most extreme, students voting with their feet could demonstrate that large numbers will prefer some real alternative to what is being offered by the econ department. However this will require a culture shift among students, including their perception – and, I would hope, the reality – of what kind of degree will be most relevant to their future lives and livelihoods. That is a question I will return to later.

### 3) Focus on teachers of economics

Having spoken about the availability of teaching materials, and the institutional context in which teaching takes place, the other critical element to consider is the landscape of economics teachers and potential teachers, including graduate students. This includes both those who are not seeking change, and those who want change but are embedded in a system where it's easy for them to believe that they are the outsiders – that most others around them are happy with things the way they are, and may indeed fight vigorously against movements for change.

3. a) We should not neglect the people in the category of not-looking-for-change, but should not automatically assume that they are the enemy; even if they are not actively looking for change, they might be more open than it appears. To be sure, it's naïve to assume that the truth will always win out, by the force of logic, but sympathy toward where people are can go a long way to finding a common path. As an example, some years ago a department chair, who was perfectly happy to go on as he always had, nevertheless adopted our “In Context” textbooks because, he told me dolefully, “Our students hate us!” I'm happy to say that a few years later he wrote to say that the atmosphere in the department had greatly improved and, he added, “It seems they are even learning something!”

Those who do want change often feel disempowered for a number of reasons:

- lack of information about what different kinds of teaching materials are available
- feeling that they are alone in their wish to do something different
- worrying about tenure – fear of being labeled radical or not a team player;
- the rigid structure of the economics curriculum, which views intro and mid level courses as most of all important to prepare for the next level

On the last of these concerns, one of the most helpful things can be research that drives home the fact that most students are not going to follow up this ladder toward a doctorate in economics.

This fact is pretty widely known, but if it were put in front of university administrators, outside of the econ department, they might recognize, as at Willamette, that the current structure is not serving well the many students who take one or a few econ courses, but will not go on to major in the subject.

3. b) The sense of disempowerment among present or future teachers who would like to make economics more relevant to real world facts and concerns is probably most effectively addressed through the creation of face-to-face communities where people can discuss common problems, and learn that they are not alone. One excellent approach to this can be in conferences, such as Rethinking Economics. Groups can also gather at the Eastern Economics Association, and even at the ASSA, though the pressure of the mainstream there can feel overwhelming, even to groups that get together to share their disenchantment.

3. c) For more long-term support and assistance another approach to is create place-based systems in which people can find continuing communities of support. This is likely to be expensive in time and effort. I imagine geographically defined groups organized with some degree of formality; there needs to be a local leader who will convene people, at least initially, around themes such as:

- Difficulties encountered when trying to teach something different from the standard material – and partially or fully successful efforts to overcome these difficulties.
- Exchanges between teachers in economics department and teachers of economics in other departments – what can each group learn from the other?
- A focus on introductory courses; what are students in these courses being prepared for?
- Pedagogical methods
- Mathematics and other abstract representations; their roles, best use, levels of difficulty

3.d) There can also be geographically disparate groups that communicate via email, Skype, or chat rooms, to share, for example,

- Good teaching materials
- Syllabi
- Pedagogical methods
- Strategies for dealing with particular issues, like unsympathetic fellow faculty
- Student expectations, e.g. for economics to be very technical, etc.

3. e) I have been stressing the psychological side of the need – that is, moral support for people who are striking out in new directions. There’s also the informational side. Distinct from chat rooms, there’s the possibility of on-line resources to aid teachers who wish to introduce new economic thinking into existing mainstream courses, or teach an entire course on a particular school of thought.

In thinking about on-line resources I see two distinct goals:

1. To make it easy for economics instructors / graduate students to find the kinds of teaching materials they are looking for; and
2. To create a taxonomy or other structure that will easily inform users of the range of possible materials – which may include contents and methods that the user did not initially think of, but will be glad to find.

Existing examples of online resources include the following:

- The Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) has a repository of syllabi with ~150 submissions across micro, macro, political economy, labor, international economics, economic history, history of thought, health, development, etc.  
(<http://www.urpe.org/res/syl/syllabihome.html>)
- The Institute for New Economic Thinking (<http://ineteconomics.org/>) offers a number of on-line courses and other materials (finding them on the website requires a patient search however).
- The Global Development And Environment Institute GDAE offers 16 teaching modules on economic theory in social and environmental context  
([http://www.ase.tufts.edu/gdae/education\\_materials/modules.html](http://www.ase.tufts.edu/gdae/education_materials/modules.html))
- The “E4A (Economics for the Anthropocene)” network, funded by the Canadian government, will provide strong curricula in ecological economics at McGill and York Universities in Canada, as well as University of Vermont. Within one or two years this should be a good resource for ecological economics teaching materials. The Director of GDAE’s Theory and Education Program, Jonathan Harris, is President-Elect of the US Society for Ecological Economics; this synergy should provide excellent access to strong resources.
- Alternative texts: there have been several surveys by list-serves, such as FemEcon and URPE, as well as studies such as that by Tom Webb. Another example is “Appropriate Economics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A 2010-1957 Guide to Relevant Books, Reports, and Articles” Compiled by Michael Marien, director, [www.globalforesightbooks.org](http://www.globalforesightbooks.org).

Research will be needed to locate additional resources along these lines.

3. f) Finally, the workshops that Geoffry Schneider offers at the annual ASSA meetings could provide a model for additional training in pedagogical methods – to give new thinkers an edge in the hiring process, to make their courses more appealing to students, and to help ensure that the students actually learn!

#### 4) Allies in the battle for ideas

Looking beyond the teachers, we should consider others who might be supportive of change in the teaching of economics – as well as those, in a wider circle of society, who might line up on the side of No Change.

4. a) The most obvious sources of support for change, beyond the teachers, are students. In one scenario teachers within a particular university might ally with students who share their values and concerns. In fact, I have not seen many examples of this; it would be useful to understand why this is so, and whether it is an important opportunity that is being missed.

A different approach would use a traditional campus organizing model to mobilize student groups on individual campuses, and connect them with others across the country – similar to the Energy Action Coalition, or Sierra Student Coalition’s organizing models. Given the evanescence of each campus group, it is important to develop a leadership structure that can last beyond the initial cohort. For this approach to be most effective, and to work in many different places at the same time, it may also be necessary to hire paid national organizers to support the student network. In the campaign model, resources such as reading lists, talking points, and meeting and event guides, could be prepared centrally and offered to individual student groups.

A less expensive start for this would be to use New Economy Coalition’s “New Economy Week” for movement-building on campuses (this already started in fall, 2013). This could be related to a national “new economy teach-in” where students in mainstream departments invite heterodox economists to give guest lectures. At the same or a different time a national organizing group could encourage a “national walk-out day.” This would probably need to include some sort of teach-in so that students are not penalized by their teachers for missing a class. There is an important role here for sympathetic professors and economists who will serve in an advisory capacity to student activists and lend professional credibility to their demands.

Finally we should consider groups external to universities whose agendas may be helped or hurt by change in the teaching of economics. There’s evidence that many in the business of finance want economics instruction to stay just as it is. Other businesses may be frustrated with the lack of realism in students they hire. This is another area that needs research.

4. b) Who else besides prospective employers have a stake in economics education? The political right wing wants to maintain a strong anti-government position, but the “new economy” movement contains many potential allies who may be found, for example, through the New Economy Coalition (<http://neweconomy.net/>). Alliances with activist groups can be used to encourage a broader national awareness of how economic problems relate to the economic theory that helped cause them.

Coinciding with major elections, activists could sponsor town hall-type meetings where economic issues important to the public are debated from both orthodox and non-orthodox perspectives. Major schools of economic thought can be connected with current economic conditions, indicating how alternative economic theories can provide alternative principles for organizing the economy. Internship programs might be developed to encourage students to do

research, or assist in providing economic literacy courses for activist groups and communities.

#### 5) Economics education within the New Economy movement

There are many promising activities going on that are pointing the way toward a new economy – one that assumes that the purpose of an economy is to improve human well-being within a healthy natural environment. The old economy contains many powerful actors that follow Milton Friedman’s dictum that the only proper goal of business is to generate profits. It is becoming more and more evident that the results from organizing the economy this way include the destruction of democracy, catastrophic ecological consequences, financial instability, and increasing social unrest and unhappiness.

I will conclude by summarizing a set of values and assumptions that are coming to be widely accepted as support for the emerging new economy. These are as much cultural as they are economic values and assumptions. They are critically important, as they strongly influence how we measure success, how we reform institutions, how we make decisions, and who gets to make the decisions

- We are part of an interconnected, living planet; a sustainable economy must operate within nature’s bounds; climate change is the signature issue bringing this into focus
- Ecological sustainability will require reduced levels of resource consumption, and is not compatible with an unbalanced emphasis on profit, growth, ever greater consumption, and high returns on private investment.
- The neoliberal experiment has shown that unfettered markets tend towards oligopoly as successful firms are able to concentrate wealth and power. The concentration of corporate power contributes to poverty and inequality, while gravely damaging communities, national resources, democratic processes, and human well-being
- In the new economy the reorganization of important aspects of work and ownership will make it possible for people to be happier and more fulfilled, while extracting a lower level of resources
- The transition to a new economy needs to be as inclusive and inviting as possible
- There is great urgency to making the transition before we cross socio-political as well as ecological tipping points

This summary draws, among other things, on a recent report from the Post Carbon Institute: *Weaving the Community Resilience and New Economy Movement*, which includes the following comment:

“Even something as seemingly entrenched as global capitalism might unwind at any moment, due to an unexpected event or the crossing of some unseen tipping point. Thus even an emergent process of change has the potential to take hold very rapidly. Meanwhile, efforts to build a new economy and thriving, resilient communities will require patience, rejecting the [temptation to follow] prevailing economic ideals of speed, efficiency, and “scaling-up” at the expense of the movement’s core values.”