To the extent that critical thinking and richer methods of pedagogy are discussed in economics, it is still often the case that the existing (strongly Neoclassical) standard content of university-level economics classes is taken for granted. Educators working across the curriculum need to be alert to the tendency of economists to interpret “critical thinking” in rather strange and narrow ways. They also should be aware of available alternative materials that could be used to help encourage deeper and broader learning about economic behavior and pressing economic issues.

Consider, for example, the following economist-authored passage from an online workbook entitled *Thinking Critically in Economics*:

Economic thinking is all about making difficult choices. Critical economic thinking is all about being aware of how you go about making such choices so that you can make the best choices possible. Success in today’s global economy requires an ability to continually reevaluate your circumstances so that you may make the best decisions you can... Economic thinking is purposeful and requires that the results of your thinking be communicated to others: be they colleagues, employees, government officials, or customers.

(Leyden, 2001)

This approach reflects well the concerns of mainstream economics, and purports to advance critical thinking within the field. Yet what if we critically examine the above passage itself, looking at its implicit assumptions, biases, and perspectives?

First, we might notice that the passage in question reflects a common mainstream definition of economics as the science of rational choice. Undergraduate economics education is focused on showing students how to solve equations or shift curves to find the rational, efficient solution to problems of choice-making in markets. Economics students are rarely encouraged to see economics as a field that is (or should be) deeply engaged in issues of inequality, poverty, discrimination, or threats to ecological sustainability.

Second, we might notice that the passage has a strong individualist bias. The emphasis is on “you,” “your” decisions, and “your” personal “[†]success in today’s global economy.” This approach is obviously designed to appeal to the self-interest of undergraduate economics students, many of whom, at many institutions, aspire to business careers. It also reflects the strong emphasis within mainstream theory on individualism, autonomy, and self-interest. Nothing in this approach challenges the student to look deeply into the sociality of human life, the duties of responsible citizenship, or the ethical dimensions of business and consumer behavior.

Third, note that the passage implicitly defines certain positions for the student in the future. In assuming that the student will need to be able to address “colleagues, employees, government officials, or customers” the passage implicitly assumes that the student will become a professional, employer, or businessperson. The point of view of laborers is notably absent, and the perspectives of public servants, citizen advocates, or actively-involved parents are likewise neglected. A particular self-identification in terms of class, power, and gender roles is catered to rather than challenged.

Even when economics classes do address social issues such as poverty or environmental degradation, the presentations are generally strongly biased towards individualist, market-oriented solutions. Students are not exposed to any alternative points of view, nor encouraged to question the assumptions behind the models taught, and are not even informed about the social or historical origins of what they are learning. Instead of engaging students’ interest, helping them integrate what they have learned across the curriculum, and educating them for citizenship, too many economics classes degenerate into exercises in abstract mathematics.

A number of groups are, however, working diligently to create materials that reflect more critical and integrated approaches to the study of economic behavior. My own organization, The Global Development and Environment Institute (www.gdae.org) at Tufts University, creates education materials designed to promote a better understanding of how societies can pursue their economic and community goals in an environmentally and socially sustainable manner. Our introductory economics textbook (Goodwin et al. 2005) takes a “contextual economics” approach, defining economics as the study of how societies organize to sustain life and enhance its quality. We also offer free, downloadable Teaching Modules, designed for use as supplements in undergraduate-level courses, on topics such as “Consumption and the Consumer Society” and “Macroeconomics and the Environment.” Other sources for alternative curriculum materials include The Center for Popular Economics (www.populareconomics.org), the Dollars & Sense collective (www.dollarsandsense.org), and the Heterodox Economics Web list of Teaching Resources (http://www.paecon.net/) also contains a number of articles relevant to teaching.

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