



# Curriculum Change in Economics Education

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Sandra Delgado

I'm an educator & researcher living in Colombia. I hold a PhD in Curriculum & Pedagogy from the University of British Columbia and a MSc in Economics from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. I'm passionate about education and my ultimate goal is to contribute to make education accessible to everyone. I'm convinced that education is key to building democratic communities that encourage free and independent thinking. I'm interested in critical and feminist pedagogies that embrace diversity, inclusion and democratic participation in curriculum design and pedagogy for higher ed. My own professional development efforts have been focused on learning about the science of learning and how people learn better. Outside of my professional pursuits, I love gardening, knitting, traveling, and dancing.

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## INTRODUCTION

The importance of the economy and economic relationships in everyday life cannot be understated; they are the setting upon which many of us make decisions, build our lives, and stake our future. The unemployment, debt, inequality, poverty, and economic uncertainty brought about by recent economic crises have escalated our need to understand and transform how the economy affects us and how we, as individuals, can learn to transform it to live well in our communities. Solutions to accessible, equitable, and affordable education, housing, safety, health services, jobs and so on are found within the economy. Therefore, understanding how the economy works has become a matter of concern and anxiety.

Not only is the economy in crisis, but so is the field of economics. Economics and economists are responsible for providing the public with an in-depth analysis and under-



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standing of the economy. Economists' predictive power was called into question as was the profession's legitimacy. During more recent economic crises mainstream economics knowledge and mainstream economists have fallen short of explanations, for example in the 2008 financial crisis where Occupy Wall Street put opposition to mainstream neoclassical economics in popular public discourse (Colander et al., 2009; Earle et al., 2017; Marglin, 2012). Once again, the roots of recent economic turmoil and economics departments worldwide have been challenged by their students because the current curriculum has not been able to help them navigate the economic uncertainty of today's challenging times (Nelson, 2018). Despite students' continuous reform in economics schools, change is slow and mainstream economics ideology continues to dominate how economics is taught at all educational levels (Decker, 2019).

Because we are facing the COVID-19 pandemic and one of the most severe economic crises seen globally, economics is once again being challenged by economics students worldwide. Students all over the world are asking for a change in their discipline's curriculum and pedagogy. Since the 2020 economic crisis in the aftermath of COVID-19, students are requesting the inclusion of more sustainable approaches of economics in their curriculum and more opportunities to apply their skills and identify how what they are learning in schools connects with current world events (Rethinking Economics, 2021). In this article, I describe some of these main recent struggles to challenge the field of economics and the type of civic action students are using to mobilize their agenda<sup>1</sup>. I hope this article helps secondary school teachers to identify possible alternatives to teaching economics in high schools, adapting current economics knowledge towards more pluralistic approaches to understanding the economy.

## RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

### The economics student movement

One of the first attempts to build an economics student movement seeking to change economics education occurred during the late 1960s and through the early 1970s at the University of Sydney. There, a group of faculty and students created a local organization to ask for changes to the neoliberal and neoclassical content in their courses (Stilwell, 2006). The dispute involved differing opinions about the nature of the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment methods, and the structures of governance in the program (Butler et al., 2009). Protestors were concerned about the hiring and firing of economics faculty, the discipline's relevance in light of the Vietnam War and the field's increasing turn away from political economy and towards mathematical economics under the influence of MIT economist Paul Samuel-

<sup>1</sup> As a doctoral student, I had the opportunity to explore the experiences of economics student activists in the movement to challenge economics education in the United Kingdom and research how their involvement in activism was an opportunity for them to rediscover the field, to forge critical thinking, independent judgment, and rethink their own identity as students, activists, and future economists. This paper is based on my doctoral dissertation where I explored the pedagogical potential of student activism in the context of economics student resistance to traditional content and pedagogies of introductory economics courses in UK universities (Delgado, 2020)



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son ([Banner, 1976](#); [Butler, 2010](#)).

Thirty Years later, the Post-Autistic Economics movement (in French: *mouvement des étudiants pour une réforme de l'enseignement de l'économie*) campaigned to reform French economics education. Similar to the protests in Sydney, French students criticized the singular dominance of neoclassical economics, lack of realism, overreliance on mathematics, and dogmatic teaching practices. The students' petition stated; "we want a pluralism of approaches, adapted to the complexity of the objects and to the uncertainty surrounding most of the big questions in economics" ([Fullbrook, 2003b](#), p. 14). Similarly, in the same year, a group of PhD students at Cambridge university asked for a curriculum reform in their department ([The Cambridge 27, 2001](#)).

Frustrated with their discipline's lack of response to the 2008 financial crisis, British students led local and global initiatives to advocate for a transformation in economics education (e.g., Post-Crash Economics Society, Rethinking Economics, ISIPE-International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics, among others). Students evaluated and documented the extent of pedagogical, methodological and ideological shortcomings of mainstream economics curriculum at the university level and propose actionable alternatives ([Rieser, 2013](#)). For instance, one study students found that 78% of undergrad exam questions asked economics students to show mastery of models and equations without asking for any independent or critical thinking, this is the case for 172 economics modules at seven top universities in the United Kingdom ([Earle et al., 2017](#); [PCES Post-Crash Economics Society, 2014](#)).

What all of these movements have in common is their critique of economics', insistence that mainstream economics education is too narrow and constraining ([Delgado, 2020](#)). They were concerned about neoclassicism's disproportionate dominance and the use of quantitative methods ([Earle et al., 2017](#); [ISIPE, 2014](#); [PCES Post-Crash Economics Society, 2014](#)). Rethinking Economics sums up the core of the reform movements: "The intricacies of methodological nuances and historical debates in the discipline of Economics remain elusive to most students, and at best, depend on the teacher's own knowledge of such topics. The lack of diverse economic traditions and alternative approaches within the curriculum disables students to deal with economic issues that can be vexing as a consequence" ([Rethinking Economics, 2022](#)).

In 2022, students continue to raise their voices and increase their efforts because their find their education unable to help them understand the real-world challenges ([Rethinking Economics, 2022](#)). For instance, the economic implications of COVID-19, economic alternatives to ameliorate the impact of worldwide lockdowns, among many other current challenges are barely mentioned in the curriculum. The mainstream approach to teaching economics continues to limit students understanding of their economic reality and the possibilities to transform it ([Earle et al., 2017](#)). Similarly, D-Econ, which stands for Diversifying and Decolonising Economics, was founded in 2019 by young PhD students to promote inclusivity in both the field and academic content. The pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, both in 2020, have prompted another, more public, round of calls for economics education reform as reflected in numerous op-eds and editorials ([Torracinto, 2022](#)) citing



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both lack of curricular relevance and diversity (Cook & Opoku-Agyeman, 2019; Opoku-Agyeman, 2020). For example, the Minnesota Federal Reserve posted an op-ed by Howard University professor of economics William Spriggs, which called for the field to re-evaluate its past and present practices with particular attention to its treatment of race and racism.

Global change in economics has been rather slow, the mainstream economics curriculum worldwide for the most part remains the same. A few faculty members have started introducing changes in their courses and economic departments gradually are widening their courses beyond mainstream theories and methods. As part of their activism, students produced alternative instructional material for teaching economics, from economics textbooks to fully documented research reports, books, and video documentaries (Earle et al., 2017; PCES Post-Crash Economics Society, 2014; Rieser, 2013). Therefore, thanks to the movement, more instructional material with a pluralist and real-world approaches has been published to help instructors modernize their courses.

## PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

### How can we teach economics if we want to change our economy?

The knowledge gap between economics technical expertise, mathematical modeling, and the democratic public sphere represents a vivid example of the failure of economics to engage meaningfully with other disciplines and to help us all understand and transform the economy. During the COVID-19 crises mainstream economics had enormous difficulties communicating their excessively complicated methods with other disciplines. Economists found themselves unable to collaborate effectively with epidemiologists, health researchers and policy-makers finding solutions to alleviate the crisis (The Economist, 2020). People around the globe found themselves involved for months in helpless debates, forced to trade-off between saving “the economy” and keeping everyone safe. Economics students argued that economists have constructed a discipline of an inaccessible, imbalanced, and highly technical knowledge. The movement not only denounces, disrupts, and challenges the disproportionate support of neoclassical theory and methods in economics but also seeks to find within the grounds of active citizenship a way to build bridges between economic knowledge and the exercise of citizenship.

A democratic and informed exercise of citizenship requires to understand the intricacies of the economy. Economics knowledge, as it is now, is barely accessible to the general public even while it affects everyone’s life. Economics, as it is currently practiced, hinders the effective practice of citizenship. As students put it, “economics underpins a technocratic system that marginalizes citizens and restricts their ability to engage with economic issues” (Earle et al.2017, p. 117). Policy makers base their measures and programs on economics models that people cannot understand. If citizens do not understand how economics reforms and policies affect them, they will not be able to make informed civic and democratic decisions.

The principles are that economics should be pluralistic and comprehensible, and its language and models should be accessible to everyone so most of the people understand what



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is behind of the decisions taken on their behalf. In other words, people should understand the assumptions in which economic policies are based and the consequences of mainstream economics knowledge (as it is being taught in schools and universities) has in everyone's future. A true exercise of citizenship entails a degree of knowledge about the economy, the logics that govern economic relationships and the alternatives to transform it.

## Q & A WITH SANDRA DELGADO

### Question #1

#### *Teacher's Question:*

To what extent do you believe the problem of critical thinking in university economics classes is a philosophical or ideological versus a pedagogical issue?

#### *Sandra Delgado's Response:*

I consider The lack of pluralism in economics education conveys a pedagogy plus curriculum issue. Curriculum studies as a field problematizes the extent to which the official curriculum (in schools or universities) is defined and the ways in which ought to be delivered. In this case, the lack of diverse economic approaches within the curriculum and the excessive mathematization of the discipline, are leaving economics students worldwide with a very limited toolbox to understand the economy and deal with current economic issues. One of the starting points for a reflection on the curriculum plus pedagogy question refers to the epistemic status of knowledge. "What knowledge should be taught to future generations and why?" are the recurrent questions that all schools and universities face as time passes and the world changes. The knowledge and skills that students learn in their curriculum is expected to be context relevant and help them respond to the challenges of their time. This choice is never neutral, as many other pedagogy plus curriculum issues, the question "what knowledge is of most worth" brings many historical, social, political, and ideological debates to the table. In the case of economics students, they are telling us, the current mainstream economics curriculum needs to be updated, refreshed, and adapted to our time because the tools and skills are falling short when facing current challenges.

### Question #2

#### *Teacher's Question:*

How do you suggest secondary school teachers begin to rethink how economics is taught if their (often limited) training is grounded in these problematic approaches? And, what resources would be helpful in this process of unlearning what they have been taught?

#### *Sandra Delgado's Response:*

I would invite secondary school teachers to introduce economics knowledge and "the economy" in a more open-ended way to their students. Our current global economic issues are



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far from simple; distributional equity, racism, poverty, exploitation, ecological degradation, employment quality, unpaid work, among many other issues, are complex unsolved questions for current mainstream economics but the answers the discipline is offering are often narrow and one-dimensional. Students are in a huge need to understand what is happening with the economy. During times of economic uncertainty and an increasing frequency of economic crises globally, I would suggest using open ended explorations where diverse perspectives of current relevant issues are presented and contextualized using real world events as examples and case studies. Here some key resources developed by economics students worldwide and academics to make economics knowledge diverse, accessible, and relevant:

1. Exploring Economics is an open access, e-learning platform on pluralist economics.
2. Economy Studies is a practical guide for (re-)designing economics courses and programs.
3. Economy Studies for Secondary Education offers content and teaching material for economics courses taught at high schools

### **Question #3**

#### ***Teacher's Question:***

Can you highlight a few examples of how a pluralistic approach to commonly taught economics concepts would differ from the neoliberal or neoclassical approaches teachers are more familiar with?

#### ***Sandra Delgado's Response:***

I will mention a couple of examples that I find relevant for economics concepts often taught at high schools. When learning about economics and how the economy in a country works, students should be enabled to grasp broader questions about social justice in the context of economic thinking. Mainstream economics often offers limited one-dimensional lenses of the economy and its macro dimensions, while intertwined with questions of social justice, which involves a plurality of lenses, the discussions are wider, richer and allow for a multiplicity of views and dimensions to be involved. It would be key if students are invited to reflect in their economic thinking from a perspective of interdisciplinarity and civic responsibility, about: sexism, racism, and migration that how all of them are intertwined with key economic challenges of our time: poverty, economic inequality, and lack of opportunities.

Another example, mainstream economics is linked to mathematical and statistical information and models, and qualitative research methods have been marginalized by the discipline mainstream practices. Bringing back reflections and examples where qualitative research enriches our understanding of the economy enables students to reflect upon economic policy problems from different perspectives beyond the numerical, which is essential from the perspective of critical thinking, as well as for participating fully in civic and democratic debate.





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## Question #4

### ***Teacher's Question:***

High school teachers often teach to prepare students to succeed in university courses. Thus, asking high school teachers to make these changes if university instructors do not is likely to meet with resistance. If you were to lead this change, how would you suggest coordinating university and high school collaborations to facilitate such changes?

### ***Sandra Delgado's Response:***

First, it is important to mention that economics departments worldwide have begun to open to the idea of pluralism in economics. They are widening their courses beyond mainstream theories and methods, thanks to the work of a growing worldwide economics student movement. In recent year, more instructional material with a pluralist and real-world approach has been published. There are many new tools available to help instructors modernize their courses. Increasingly, more economics departments are hiring academics from non-mainstream schools and diverse disciplines, reversing the narrowing of the discipline during the past decades.

If I were to lead this change, I would invite high school teachers to: (1) familiarize yourself with the debate, check resources and available reading material. All of these resources can help teachers identify possible opportunities to add diverse perspectives to their current courses and add relevant real world examples and case studies (2) Engage in conversations with local economics student organizations (here is a list of regional groups worldwide) to receive first-hand knowledge of how students are building community locally. Students are constantly organizing events, workshop sessions, reading groups, book launches, and so on, for a diverse range of audiences. (3) Identify opportunities in your current courses for redesign: either adding diverse voices, or a wider range of theories and points of view or using real world examples as case studies for students to debate and discuss (Visit economy studies web page for more ideas).

## Question #5

### ***Teacher's Question:***

How do you envision that teaching economics pluralistically would shift the way people would or could engage in political discourse?

### ***Sandra Delgado's Response:***

The exceptional centrality of “the economy” in our society and role that economics knowledge plays in political decision-making is making economics education fundamental for everyone. As I mention in the paper, in the intricacies of the economy seems to be the key to access education, housing, safety, health services, jobs and so on. Therefore, economics education should be able to equip students with the tools needed to navigate real world economic issues affecting their lives. Everyone, not only economists or finance experts,



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should be able to face economic policy questions and challenges that they will encounter during their daily civic and domestic lives. Urgent economic local and global challenges have causal roots in how economics is being taught, and these issues are shaping the economic and political landscape globally. Economics education at all levels is based on a narrow and outdated set of models, assumptions, and methods. The world is quickly presenting to us more challenging situations, and an outdated, monolithic, and fixed curriculum, prevents critical, creative, and future-oriented thinking. The economics curriculum at all levels should be preparing students for a lifetime of engagement with a living and changing economic landscape.

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