

## **DEBATE “PRO ET CONTRA” AS AN EDUCATIONAL METHOD IN ECONOMICS**

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### **Abstract**

The author argues in his study that classroom debate as an educational method is a highly efficient method for promoting more pluralism and holism in education of today's economists in order to better resolve today's emerging and persisting problems. Neoclassical school has consolidated its monopoly position within economics and in the broad framework of social sciences mainly through the education process by dictating strict methodological rules. Consequently, the economic theory lost the capacity of an anthropocentric view of the world due to the conflict between the domination of the neoclassical paradigm and the lack of pluralism within economics and beyond it. Debate is one of the main educational method for introducing more pluralism and holism into economics in order to foster understanding of today's problems and to contribute meaningfully to their solutions. Debate “pro et contra” is an equitably structured rhetorical event in the class about some topic of interest, with opposing advocates alternating before a decision-making body. Different (economic) schools of thought are presented in debates in order for the students to be able to appreciate the variety of presented perspectives. At the same time debate also increases students' capacity for critical, controversial and original thinking.

**Keywords:** neoclassical paradigm, pluralism, holism, debate pro et contra

### **1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Education of today's economists is based on the strict methodological rules which foster domination of the neoclassical paradigm in economics and in the broad framework of social sciences. The divisions in the scientific community have become synonymous for partial analyses and mutual exclusion of ideas. Several authors therefore pointed out the importance of pluralism and holism in economics (Mearman, 2007; King, 2004; Freeman, 2010; Söderbaum, 2008).

Due to partial analyses economic theory has lost its capacity of an anthropocentric view of the world. Thus, the pledge for a change in the education system of economists has been addressed on one hand by scholars (Barone, 1991; Goodvin, 2008) and on the other hand by students (e.g. Post-autistic movement in France). Recent developments have also influenced our need to change the education system of economists. The crisis that erupted in 2007 has significantly intensified the controversy about the status of the mainstream economics because of its failure to adequately grasp it (Blinder, 2010; Kowalski, Shachmurove, 2011; Colander, Foellmer, Haas, 2009; Hodgson, 2011). The global financial and economic crisis raises the question of how this should be reflected in the education system of today's economists and their curriculum.

I believe that educational technology can help in changing the education system of today's economists. Educational technology is defined as an array of tools that might prove helpful in supporting student learning, creativity and problem solving. Educational technology refers to material objects of use, such as software or hardware, but it can also encompass broader themes, including new methods of organization and new educational methods.

The classroom debate as an educational method can be used for promoting more pluralism and holism in education of today's economists in order to better resolve today's problems. Debate also enables students to be more engaged in the education process. The roles of the students and teachers have to change, with students increasingly becoming a subject of the educational process and teachers becoming, more than in traditional role, moderators thereof. Debaters learn not only to compete with others but also to help each other by accomplishing cooperatively the tasks they have been assigned. Snider and Schnurer (2006) argue that economic issues are well suited for a debate. Similarly, McCloskey (1983) argues that rhetoric is a fruitful way of introducing the nature of various truth claims.

Education is on one hand the main factor of domination of the neoclassical paradigm and on the other hand it can become through the debate as an educational method for introducing more pluralism and holism to economics. These aspects have not been simultaneously and adequately addressed in the literature so far.

The main purpose of the article is threefold. (1) I argue that neoclassical school has consolidated its monopoly position within economics and in the broad framework of social sciences by dictating strict methodological rules. (2) To show conflict between domination of the neoclassical paradigm and the lack of pluralism and holism in the education system. (3) To conduct a qualitative study in order to present debate as an efficient educational method for promoting more pluralism and holism in economics.

The article is structured as follows. In section two, education as a factor of methodological normativism and dominance of the neoclassical school is presented. In section three, I point out the importance of pluralism and holism within economics. In section four a qualitative study about student perceptions of debate as an educational method is presented in order to show how debate is an efficient method for more promoting pluralism and holism within economics. The last section concludes by summarizing the main findings.

## **2. METHODOLOGICAL NORMATIVISM AND DOMINANCE OF THE NEOCLASSICAL PARADIGM**

The theories that sprang up before the birth of modern science were related to everyday experience and as such, they relied heavily on the influence, intellectual breadth, and perspicacity of the individual. In the Middle Ages, the interest in the inductive method that promoted empirical research and testable theories mounted (Sušjan, 1993). Positivism broke the link between science and everyday experience to provide a solid foundation for those sciences that were willing to adopt the strict rules of the scientific method (Ule, 1992). Positivism, with its rigorous methodology, stresses objectification of knowledge and erects the foundations of science which is equated with classical physics (Blaug, 1992; Ule, 1992). Popper (1998) replaces the method of hypothesis testing (verification) with the method of hypothesis rejection (falsification) in the belief that scientists are often reluctant to dismiss their own hypotheses<sup>1</sup>. The gist of the Popperian approach is to freely propose hypotheses that can withstand the harshest possible attempts of rejection (Popper 1998).

Economics has developed a relatively simple set of methodological apparatus, which resulted in a high level of unity. Neoclassical school with extensive use of mathematical formalism and statistical techniques adopted the methodology of natural sciences. Worswick (1972) and Pheby (1988) go so far as to submit that economics has become indiscernible from mathematics, a discipline that represents the apex of scientific purity. McCloskey (1983) defines predominating methodological approach in modern economic theory, as a combination of logical positivism, behaviourism, deductive method, instrumentalism, and operationalism:

1. Due to the need for objectification of knowledge, the economy soon found itself in the grip of scientific deductivism, deriving from economic axioms (e.g. rationality) logical conclusions by employing mathematical methodology to maintain consistency. Hypothesis tests are the main vehicle through which neoclassical school manifests its scientific character.

2. Friedman (1984), as the main representative of instrumentalists, stresses that economic theory must be verified by the forecasts derived from it. The main goal is to submit hypotheses and the central test of their validity is the comparison between a forecast and experience; based on this comparison, a theory is either

adopted or rejected.

3. Samuelson's argues that a theory is not necessary in the operational sense, if the algebraic signs or parameters are not specified as in such case it can be subject to constant rejection.

Neoclassical methodology is relying on deductive reasoning, bold testing of hypotheses, and checking the hypotheses against empirical facts. The starting point is the individual's rationality from which equilibrium is inferred through deductive logic.

McCloskey (1983) and Phelps (1990) maintain that most economists accept this methodology regardless of whether they may belong to the mainstream camp (neoclassical school) or whether they are their main opponents (heterodox school). It may be viewed as a paradox that the ideas of the Chicago school, unacceptable to many from the aspect of contents, were perfectly acceptable from the aspect of methodology. Obviously the neoclassical methodology is an ideal for the majority of economists. This not only leads to domination of the neoclassical school within the economic community but also fuels its drive to conquer other non-economic fields.

The domination of the neoclassical paradigm has been often addressed in the economic scientific community (Johnson, 1983). Paradigm is understood as a conceptual and methodological core that is common to all members of a particular scientific community. It involves a set of generally adopted assumptions acquired through the education process, which a scientist can employ in conjunction with modelling techniques to resolve the problems in a certain way without having to re-establish or clarify the basic assumptions (Kuhn, 1998).

Neoclassical school has gained its monopoly within economics mainly by dictating the strict methodological rules through the educational process. The unity of textbooks and academic programmes clearly illustrates the high level of domination of the neoclassical school. The methodology employed by the mainstream starts with economic axioms (e.g. rationality) from which equilibrium as the solution of agent maximization problems is inferred through deductive logic. It seems that mathematics has become the "lingua franca" of modern economics.

Neoclassical economics developed its competitive advantages relative to other social sciences for three reasons. Firstly, expansion of neoclassical economics to new fields runs parallel to increasing prominence of economic approaches. Secondly, economics is unusually (un)lucky in its endeavour to combine rationality in economic theory and rationality in the theory of science (Kovač, 2011). Objectification of knowledge at the epistemic level allows a systematic organization of theoretical knowledge; thus, the "system of rationality" is extended to the very theory of science as well. Rational science is thus connected with the economic models of rational behaviour of agents, which allows the economic theory to a great extent to penetrate other non-economic fields. Thirdly, divisions and institutionalization of science within particular scientific communities created the circumstances for the venture of economics into other, non-economic fields. Neoclassical theory argues that rationality can be applied to all fields of human life where scarce resources and problems of choice appear (Becker, 1976).

#### **4. FOR MORE PLURALISM AND HOLISM IN THE EDUCATION OF TODAY'S ECONOMISTS**

A methodological approach that is based exclusively on mathematical tools and statistical methods is no longer adequate for today's circumstances. Many authors assert that neoclassical economics has relatively weak forecasting power since it has failed most conspicuously when attempting to provide practical advice. Similarly, Goodwin (2008) and Freeman (2010) argue that neoclassical school has neglected the consistency between theory and reality. Mayhew (2008) points out that orthodox economics is inadequate for providing an account of the lives of the vast majority of people. The crisis that erupted in 2007 has significantly intensified the controversy about the status of mainstream economics (Blinder, 2010; Helbing, Ballelli, 2010; Kowalski, Shachmurove, 2011).

It is my deep belief that reality should have a stronger influence on education of economists, especially when a growing divergence between reality and theory can no longer be denied. Education of today's economists is based mainly on the neoclassical approach which fosters exclusion within economic community and beyond it. Such domination of the neoclassical paradigm in economics and in the broad framework of social sciences leads to partial analyses and localized worlds. As a rule, the results are verified within the economic scientific community and interpreted mainly within the dominant neoclassical paradigm. Consequently, economic theory has lost its capacity of an anthropocentric view of the world, which has resulted in its increasing social irrelevance. Therefore, the trade-off between methodological rigor and capacity to address

real world problems is primarily a conflict between domination of the neoclassical paradigm and a lack of pluralism and holism within economics.

The key goal of post-modernism is to move beyond paradigmatic approaches, as well as to promote cooperation between scientific disciplines in order to reap mutual benefits and foster intellectual openness (Johnson, 1983; Hassard, 1993). A higher level of mutual communication, tolerance, cooperation, and competition between different scientific communities should be developed. Only such interactive process will allow understanding and resolving the emerging problems and puzzles. Post-modernism promotes with slogan "anything goes" new methodological approaches as no approach is neither privileged nor à priori eliminated (Ule, 1992; Feyerabend's, 1999).

The aim of pluralism is to promote mutual understanding among practitioners of different approaches within economics. However, no approach would be either privileged or à priori eliminated. For example, we do not know whether the present crisis is best understood by orthodox (neoclassical) or heterodox theories (e.g. institutional, post-Keynesian, Marxian). It is simply impossible to establish since there is no absolute set of appraisal criteria by which to judge the theories (incommensurability problem). Thus, an economist could use approaches that would, in his own belief, be best suited for a particular problem and situation. This would enable a more democratic debate within economic discipline and at the same time contribute significantly to better understanding of the real economy since decision-makers would have a range of different policy scenarios at their disposal.

The issue of holism views the problem of divisions in the scientific community as synonymous with partial analyses and mutual exclusion of ideas. Neoclassical economics has often simply ignored any critique pointed out by other scientific disciplines and rather than acknowledge its weakness developed a strong conviction of its own power. Rigorous methodology and advances into other fields of science clearly illustrate the drive of the neoclassical theory for a high level of self-sufficiency, and a lack of willingness for deeper cooperation with other scientific disciplines.

Thus, the key goal in education of today's economists should be to move beyond the paradigmatic approaches in economics and to promote deeper cooperation between different scientific disciplines in order to reap mutual benefits and foster intellectual openness. I also strongly believe that only such education process will foster understanding of the emerging problems and contribute meaningfully to their solutions. I believe that the urge for a deeper understanding of today's problems demands a different education approach that would leave generations of future scholars more familiar with different schools of thought within economics and more willing to closely cooperate with other scientific disciplines. The students would therefore be better suited to understand the today's problems. Teaching of economics should include today more readings of economic classics as well as relevant topics from other scientific disciplines. More pluralistic and holistic education would undoubtedly increase the students' capacity for critical, controversial and original thinking in order to avoid the mistakes of their teachers. The aim of the next section is to show whether debate as an educational method is suitable for helping us to achieve these goals.

## **5. DEBATE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR PROMOTING MORE PLURALISM IN ECONOMICS - A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

McCloskey (1994) argues that economists' genuine workaday rhetoric, the way they argue inside their heads or their seminar rooms, diverges from the official rhetoric. Economists should focus more on their rhetoric, because they will then better know why they agree or disagree by using economic metaphors, the relevance of historical precedents, the persuasiveness of introspections, the power of authority, the charm of speaker and the claims of morality (McCloskey, 1994). Rhetoric is a disciplined conversation and by "rhetoric" it does not mean a verbal shell game, as in "empty rhetoric" (McCloskey, 1994).

I believe that the ability to teach students through a more interactive debate process to develop new thoughts and to explore new theoretical ideas within and beyond economics in order to better understand and solve the real world problems should be the key goals in education of every economist. I firmly believe that debate "pro et contra" as an educational method can help us tremendously in achieving these goals. Debate is an equitably structured rhetorical event in the class about some topic of interest, with opposing advocates alternating before a decision-making body. All designated sides are given equal opportunity to present their views. A debate should be structured, with established communication periods with a beginning and an end (Snider, 2006).

Debate "pro et contra" was conducted in the PhD class at the Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Among a wide variety of debate formats I decided to employ the format that would help me the

most to achieve the goals specified above. The format for the classroom debate (debate in vivo) involved two opposite teams plus a public assembly. Each two weeks I appointed two teams and gave reading assignments (posted on the course website) for the following class. The teams were required to prepare a public discussion (debate) on the selected topic to be presented in the classroom. In the debate, they sought to persuade their opponents and the rest of the students in the class. Team A advocated the thesis and Team B took the opposing side. Both teams presented their arguments during a public debate following a previously defined protocol.

Cross examination allowed the two teams to challenge the opponent, request clarification of arguments, refute their claims, etc. Both members take part equivalently in the argumentation. The forum with other students in the class took place at the end of the discussion. I kept track of time and intervened if the rules were not complied with; at the end, I summed up the issue and formed a conclusion. After the debate, the class voted the winning team. Each team had to write a preliminary report highlighting the key arguments and positions for the debate and send it one week before the class debate. After written feedback students have substantially improved their arguments and were thus better prepared for the discussion in the class by the following week.

Our qualitative analysis is based on a survey of all students in the class. For higher level of objectivity, all students were requested to fill out the questionnaire before taking the final written exam. The questionnaire is divided into two parts (Evaluation of the course content, Evaluation of instructor). In the second part and partly in the first part closed questions were used since all possible answers are identified and the respondent is asked to choose one of the answers. Students were asked to evaluate for example in the first section the course reading materials and debate approach. Respondents chose their responses on a five-level rating scale to express the degree of agreement with a particular statement.

We are mainly interested in the first part of the questionnaire where combination of open- and closed-ended questions was used in order to allow students to evaluate in any way they wanted the quality of "pro et contra" debate in the class. Open-ended questions enable students to better express the quality of the classroom debate. We can examine several quotations from the questionnaire in order to show how students recognised the importance, benefits and usefulness of debate as an educational method.

Debate encourages students to use different (economic) theories to analyse a particular problem. The reading materials were a combination of different theoretical traditions, in order to bring out antagonism between different (economic) schools. Also by looking at the same problem from different scientific communities improves the student's understanding of the problem. Many students expressed the advantages of more holistic approach:

- Student No.1: Debate was the most interesting part since it was challenging and you can understand specific topic more precisely.
- Student No.2: Broad views on some topic.
- Student No.3: We have to look at the topic from different points of view.
- Student No.4: To be able to see two sides of the same topic.

Pluralism within and beyond economics consequently encourages students to think more critically and originally. With particular theoretical schools and scientific communities too often teaching passive acceptance of their ideas, the debate helps student to practice critical thinking over and over again. Students have to explain their strategies and always provide constructive feedback in a debate, answering the questions of the opponent team and the audience. Several students point out this advantage by saying:

- Student No.1: The debates foster criticism by each student for others arguments.
- Student No.2: Freedom of thinking and providing arguments.
- Student No.3: It stimulates fruitful discussion.
- Student No.4: I believe that debate encourage critical thinking.
- Student No.5: Bringing different arguments help students in critical assessment.

It seems that student greatly prefer debate as an educational method over the traditional ex-cathedra teaching in the class. In the questionnaire one of the question was "Should the debate pro et contra as a teaching method be changed to classical ex-cathedra teaching?"

- Student No.1: No. Even though this (debate) way of teaching is more demanding for the students I believe it is really effective and it should be continued.
- Student No.2: Definitely not. It is a nice concept that forces us every week to do some research.
- Student No.3: I enjoy much more debate than a classical cathedra teaching method.
- Student No.4: This is a convenient method to include students.
- Student No.5: Debate really improves the student understanding of the theory.
- Student No.6: We have got much more in depth than ex-cathedra.
- Student No.7: We read more, we are focused more and everybody understands better.

The possible disadvantage of such pluralistic - debate approach is that it can increase the confusion among students. On one hand, the reason can be found in the fact that we pushed students too far by compelling them to consider the full complexity of the problems. Pluralism may lead to intellectual nihilism by giving students the right to assume whatever they feel happy with is right. A few students emphasized these risks by stating:

- Student No.1: Many times I was confused about the right explanation since so many streams of thought were presented. More coordinated debate is needed.
- Student No.2: At the end of the debate overall conclusion should be point out more clearly so students would be less confused.
- Student No.3: I did not like when debates were confusing or fuzzy.

A variety of findings emerged from a questionnaire. Several quotations show that students recognised the importance, benefits and usefulness of debate as an educational method. The vast majority of students expressed a preference for looking on emerging problems from different theoretical perspectives. Also debates enabled students to think more critically and originally and so they strongly prefer debate as an educational method over the traditional ex-cathedra teaching. The negative side of such a lively debate in the class could be that it can increase some confusion among students.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Neoclassical school has developed a fairly straightforward and closed system based on rationality, equilibrium, and methodological individualism. The starting point is the concept of rationality which became the standard tool of analysis and the law of conduct. The unity of introductory textbooks and academic programmes clearly illustrates the high level of domination of the neoclassical school in economics. Its monopoly position is mainly perpetuated through the education process as strict methodological rules have become an ideal for the majority of contemporary economists.

This methodology not only leads to domination of the neoclassical school within economic scientific community, but also propels its drive to conquer other, non-economic fields. Consequently, because of its self-sufficiency, economic theory has lost the capacity to take an anthropocentric view of the world, which has led to social irrelevance of the neoclassical paradigm. Thus, I believe that the origins of social irrelevance of the neoclassical paradigm can be primarily found in the education system. The trade-off between methodological normativism and understanding of the real world is primarily a conflict between domination of the neoclassical paradigm in education systems and lack of pluralism and holism within it.

I also believe that today's problems demand different education methods. The key goal in education of today's economists should be to move beyond the paradigmatic approaches in economics and to promote deeper cooperation between different scientific disciplines in order to foster understanding of today's problems and to contribute meaningfully to their solutions.

Debate as an educational method can helps us tremendously in achieving these goals. Our qualitative study, based on an survey about student perception of debate, shows that a classroom debate can be a highly efficient educational method for promoting more pluralism and holism in education of today's economists. Students are presented different schools of thought in order to be able to appreciate the variety of perspectives. At the same time, looking at the same problem from different points of view of different scientific communities also improves the student's understanding of the real world and emerging problems. Debate attracts more interest and motivates involvement from the students for the discussion in the classroom debate. At the same time debate also increases students' capacity for critical, controversial and

original thinking. Such a change in pedagogical practice by using the debate introduces a more pluralistic concept in the education of economists through greater student engagement in the lectures than in a traditional one way transfer of knowledge from teachers to students.

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