

**TOWARDS AN ACTIVIST PEDAGOGY
IN HETERODOX ECONOMICS:
THE CASE OF TRADE UNION
ECONOMICS TRAINING**

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The point of progressive political economy is not just to interpret the world but to change it. And a broad mission of social change has always infused heterodox economics.¹ Progressive economists aim to lay bare the workings of modern capitalism, emphasizing both its obvious weaknesses and its often-surprising strengths. We work to document the many dimensions of economic, social, and environmental damage wrought by neoliberalism, while emphasizing that those negative outcomes are not inevitable (instead, they reflect economic and political choices – that can be changed). Finally, we work to identify the most promising avenues and opportunities for achieving progressive economic and social change, both incremental and transformative. We strive to develop alternative economic visions that will be useful in activist campaigns to reform or replace capitalism.

However, despite this natural predilection to apply our ideas and expertise within a broader project of social change, the connection between heterodox economics and progressive political movements is not as strong as it could or should be. It is naïve, verging on arrogant, for progressive economists to simply assume that their analyses and policy proposals should automatically be taken up by social and political activists. Instead, the connection between political economy scholarship and progressive political activism must be pro-actively fostered and

1 Of course, heterodox economics is very diverse, encompassing a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches, and the corresponding policy and political inclinations of heterodox economists are equally diverse.

carefully maintained. Making the most of the knowledge produced by heterodox economists (and utilizing their talents and commitment in political campaigns and policy initiatives) requires planning, relationship building, communication, mutual respect, and much hard work.

I have argued previously that progressive economic literacy is a crucial ingredient in social change organizing (Stanford, 2009/10), but that progressive political movements underutilize the potential contributions of heterodox economists in their campaigns for a better economy. And I have proposed several specific avenues (aimed at academics and activists alike) for building more productive connections between progressive economic scholarship and activism (Stanford, 2008a). One obvious channel for strengthening this relationship is through progressive economics education within social change communities. Training in progressive economics would help to lift the level of economic understanding among activists – regarding the causes and consequences of capitalist economic failure, and the content and strategy of progressive economic alternatives. At the same time, economics education can facilitate knowledge transfer in the other direction, too. By participating in activist education projects, progressive economists can learn about current struggles, become more familiar with the challenges facing grassroots movements, and identify promising topics and populations for future scholarly research. In a purely functional sense, simply providing occasions (through educational events and courses) for progressive activists and heterodox economists to meet each other would itself facilitate greater communication and cooperation.

Numerous initiatives have been undertaken in various countries to translate heterodox economic knowledge and ideas into formats that are more accessible and useful to social change movements, and to systematically train movement activists in progressive political-economy.² However, the task of teaching social and political activists

2 Some that I am familiar with in the English language include: *Dollars & Sense* magazine and its associated textbook initiative; popular economics courses offered by organizations such as the Center for Popular Economics, the Highlander Center, the Catalyst Centre, and United for a Fair Economy; the Speakers' Bureau and related activities organized by the Union for Radical Political Economics; the "Common Sense Economics" program developed by the AFL-CIO; economics courses offered by many other unions and labour organizations; and occasional seminars and popular education initiatives sponsored by various networks of progressive economists and heterodox economics departments around the world.

about economics, even from a heterodox (rather than textbook or neoclassical) perspective, is not straightforward. In this article I will reflect on pedagogical challenges I have encountered in the course of designing and delivering popular economics education programmes for trade unionists – as a case study in activist economics education. The first part of the article briefly reviews some themes in existing literature regarding pedagogical issues arising from ‘popular education’ in social movement settings. One particularly relevant theme in this literature is the difficulty of relying on traditional models of transferring knowledge from ‘expert’ instructor to ‘passive’ learners; this challenge is especially relevant in economics, given the common (but unjustified) assumption that it is inherently a technical, mathematical, intimidating discipline, unintelligible to average people. The next section describes a specific instance of structured trade union economics education: a week-long residential course in ‘Economics for Trade Unionists’ delivered through the Paid Educational Leave program of Unifor, a large Canadian trade union. The main features of the course (and its institutional setting) are described. The third part of the article then catalogues several insights gleaned, and pitfalls encountered, in the course of developing and delivering that course; these insights and lessons are relevant to the broader task of developing an accessible, activist economics pedagogy. The conclusion summarizes some final lessons and recommendations.

Themes and Issues in Activist Pedagogy

There is an extensive literature regarding the theory and practice of ‘popular education,’ including much research which considers the application of participatory adult education techniques within the context of social change movements. For the purposes of this article, we consider ‘activist education’ to refer broadly to any education initiative designed and delivered with the explicit aim of supporting and strengthening participation in social change movements or campaigns. Education can strengthen activism by raising awareness among participants about a social problem or issue, by raising awareness about a social change movement, and/or by enhancing the skills and capacities of participants to participate in that movement more effectively and successfully. By this definition, activist education is most likely to occur among adult learners, focusing on members or potential members of

social change movements, and outside of the context of formal educational institutions (schools, colleges, and universities). Indeed, social movements 'are arguably one of the richest sites for learning outside of the formal school systems' (Hall and Turray, 2006: 24).

After all, education constitutes the first triad of the famous activist mantra: 'educate, organize, mobilize'. Progressive educators have long tried to identify and improve pedagogical processes which would not just 'train' activists in requisite knowledge and skills, but empower them, enhance their confidence and self-determination, and thus translate more fundamentally into subsequent organizing and mobilizing. Activist education must be both critical (making judgments about the state of affairs) and emancipatory (aimed at facilitating change in that state of affairs; Foley, 2001). Activist educators such as Paulo Freire and Myles Horton (Freire, 1970; Horton and Freire, 1990) stress the necessity for popular education to consider issues, problems, and themes that arise from the lived experience or 'everyday world' (Smith, 1987) of the learners. This is not just for the purpose of allowing the learners to more readily apply their education in subsequent activism, but indeed may be an essential psychological ingredient in the cognitive learning process itself.

In the same way, the *collective* nature of knowledge acquisition (and a collective commitment by learners to mobilizing knowledge in a shared social struggle) has been theorized to be a crucial ingredient in adult learning in social movement contexts (Kilgore, 1999). Eyerman and Jamieson (1991) theorize a psychological process of 'cognitive praxis', whereby social change activists learn (both formally and informally) about their movement (and about their lives) through a sense of shared identity, and common struggle for a shared goal.

The application of gained knowledge in concrete tasks relevant to a social change movement is a key channel through which knowledge can be mobilized, retained, and shared within an activist setting. Freire (1970) emphasized a 'problem-posing' approach, in which educators assist learner groups in identifying key priorities for action based on their lived experiences. This requires educators to be immersed in the experiences and communities of the learners, and to actively participate in the process of identifying problems, considering them, and proposing solutions that arise organically from the learners themselves. (Freire contrasts this to what he calls the traditional 'banking' model of

education, whereby instructors presume to merely transfer knowledge to the learners.) The problem-posing method has ready application in many social movements, wherever learning can be oriented around real-world challenges faced by a movement and its participants. In a labour union setting, such challenges with pedagogical application include many workplace issues, such as health and safety problems (Wallerstein, 1983), the grievance system (Carter 2013), technological change (Sawchuk, 2001), or corporate financial affairs. Instructors must keep in mind that the lived experience of the learners, and hence their path toward identifying solutions through problem-posing exercises, will be shaped by their personal situations with respect to class, gender, race and ethnicity, family circumstances, and other defining characteristics (Linné, 2009; Ferretti, 1999). The trade union economics course described below has attempted to include several specific problem-posing exercises as a way of connecting the curriculum to the workplace conditions, concerns, and conflicts experienced by the students.

Much research and theorizing in the popular education literature has considered problems associated with reliance on an 'expert' instructor. Granting learners more participation and autonomy in the learning process itself contributes to their fight for self-determination in other areas of life, and hence is consistent with the goals of liberation and equality. Rogers (1969) emphasized the 'facilitational' nature of popular education, whereby the educator's role is to assist learners in analyzing their own lives, sharing experiences, and coming to conclusions. Others, however, emphasize that the appropriate role for the instructor is not to abandon or hide their expertise and privilege, but rather to leverage it within an educational process that enhances the individual and collective power of their learners (Foley, 2001). Given the specialized, seemingly technical nature of economics, this concern over the appropriate role for the 'expert' instructor is particularly acute, and must be considered carefully in designing both course content and mode of delivery. The expert knowledge of progressive economists can indeed be mobilized in successful popular education in economics. But this mobilization must be undertaken with caution, supplemented from the beginning by proactive efforts to enhance the participation, hands-on experience, and self-confidence of learners. The goal is to find a balance which utilizes the knowledge and credibility of the instructor, but in a manner which enhances the capacities of the students to engage in economic debates and advocacy after the course is complete.

A Case Study in Trade Union Economics Education

Trade unions constitute an important social movement in most countries in the world. Their often central role in episodes of social change reflects the universal relevance of employment (and the conditions and compensation of employment) for the life experience of most people. The strength of trade unionism in different countries varies with economic and political conditions; the legal framework governing union membership and collective bargaining; the attitudes, expectations, and militance of working people; and other factors. And unions themselves demonstrate differing forms and intensities of engagement with social change activism: some are relatively bureaucratic and economic (focused mostly on the business of negotiating and managing collective agreements), and may not see themselves as a 'social movement' at all. In most parts of the world, however, unions have recognized the importance of broader economic, political, and social issues, and work to position themselves as a voice for general progressive social change – above and beyond the immediate workplace concerns of their particular members.

Trade unions undertake a wide range of educational and training initiatives. These may include:

- union-sponsored or co-sponsored programs to develop direct work-related skills among their members (often undertaken in conjunction with employers and business associations);
- courses and programs to enhance practical skills required in union activity (such as collective bargaining, health and safety protection, grievance arbitration, employment equity, and so on);
- education initiatives related to broader social, political, and community priorities (such as labour history, political issues, or international issues).

Union education activities are important not only in enhancing the skills and capacities of union members (both in doing their jobs, and in their activism as union members), but also for enhancing the stature and relevance of the union itself as an important institution in workplace affairs (Arnold *et al.*, 1991). At its best, 'an education/research dynamic rooted in the union local helps build the potential for workplace

democracy and organizational capacity in the labour movement' (Sawchuk, 2001: 347).

In terms of pedagogical approach, trade union educational activities reflect an equally broad range of experience: from conventional classroom-style instruction to less formal, participatory programs which incorporate some practices from the popular education tradition. In most cases, the union itself participates in organizing and funding³ the program, and will have an institutional interest regarding the desired goals of the learning. In that sense, few union education initiatives fully embrace the participatory, self-directed vision of 'popular education' described in some of the literature surveyed above. However, union educators will be sympathetic to popular education goals like learner empowerment, rooting learning in the experiences of everyday life (especially everyday work life), and using education as a building block in longer-lasting activism.

Economics education in a trade union setting would fall mostly into the third category of union education listed above: namely, forming part of the union's effort to broadly enhance the level of political economic awareness and confidence among its leaders, activists, and members. A union would not usually attempt to train its own members for the purpose of actually practicing economics-related functions in their job; for that a student would normally need to receive formal economics training at a college or university. To a limited extent, some aspects of trade union economics training might assist students in their subsequent duties as union leaders and negotiators (for example, by learning to research corporate financial statistics, or understanding relationships between inflation, nominal wages, and real wages). But, for the most part, a union's interest in economics education is motivated by its general goal of fostering a progressive, knowledgeable, and confident culture of political economy among its key cadre.

Throughout my professional experience as an economist with a major Canadian industrial trade union, a significant dimension of my responsibilities has involved membership education in economics-related topics. This educational work has taken many forms, including the

3 Often a union may negotiate funding from employers and/or public agencies, but is still responsible at least indirectly for the financial viability of the training program.

preparation of written and audio-visual educational materials around economics topics; guest lectures to union audiences (in individual workplaces, communities, or union bodies); and the preparation and delivery of more formal economics courses for smaller groups of union members. Through this experience I have learned several lessons regarding the instruction and communication of heterodox economic ideas to trade union members: including ways of teaching, problems encountered in learning, and the general value of progressive economics competency for their work as trade union activists. The remainder of this article will catalogue several specific considerations and insights gleaned largely from the design and delivery of one particular course: a one-week intensive program called 'Economics for Trade Unionists,' delivered annually to students by Unifor⁴ (a major Canadian union) at its own residential educational facility in Port Elgin, Ontario.

The 'Economics for Trade Unionists' course forms part of Unifor's larger Paid Educational Leave (PEL) program. Costs of PEL courses are funded through levies negotiated by union locals with their respective employers, in the course of normal collective bargaining. This practice began in the late 1970s.⁵ The PEL levies are usually set in terms of a certain number of cents per hour worked; a typical levy might require an employer to pay 5 cents per hour worked into its local union's PEL fund. (Sometimes PEL levies are negotiated in explicit gross amounts, rather than cents per hour.) PEL monies collected within each local PEL fund are then used to cover the lost-time wages, tuition, and room and board costs associated with sending local members to PEL courses conducted at Port Elgin. The Port Elgin complex (called the Family Education Centre) was first established in the 1950s as a remote facility for weekend educationals and other smaller programs; with the advent of the PEL program it was substantially expanded and upgraded. It resembles a small residential college, with classroom, administrative, and recreational facilities capable of hosting up to 250 students in residence-style accommodation.

4 Unifor was formed in 2013 through the merger of the former Canadian Auto Workers with the Communications Energy and Paperworkers; for more history and description of Unifor see www.unifor.org

5 A history of the program is provided by Roth, 1997.

The overall PEL curriculum includes over 50 different course offerings per year. The largest is a 4-week 'Basic PEL' program, which covers a wide curriculum including labour history, the goals of the union movement, collective bargaining, introductory labour law, introductory political-economy, and equity issues. Dozens of more advanced and specialty courses (many of which require completion of the Basic PEL course as a prerequisite) delve more deeply into specific material, primarily through one- and two-week courses. The PEL curriculum is fully controlled by the union; there is no employer or government role in designing or delivering the courses. Participants in PEL programs are selected by the local unions which send them to Port Elgin on the basis of expressed personal interest and the perceived needs and priorities of the locals. Participants must normally be members of the union; some have received formal post-secondary education, but many have not. Their normal jobs are in union-represented workplaces (in a wide range of manufacturing, resources, transportation, and services industries). PEL students receive their normal wages while in a course at Port Elgin; being selected to participate in a course is a unique opportunity to become more deeply involved in their union (not to mention enjoy some time away from the usual grind of paid employment).

PEL courses are mostly taught by peer educators, selected on the basis of their past PEL participation and promise. They are also paid lost-time wages and expenses to stay at Port Elgin and teach the courses. Peer educators are supervised and supplemented by full-time staff from the union's Education Department, and by other union staff recruited as needed to assist with particular courses.

After they finish their courses, graduating PEL students are encouraged to become or remain active in the activities of their locals. It is hoped that their broader awareness of the goals, history, and activities of the trade union movement, as well as the personal enthusiasm which most students experience as a result of their participation in the program, will enhance their subsequent union activity – although there is no guarantee or requirement of continued personal activism. Most local leaders in the union have participated in one or more PEL programs in the course of their trade union 'careers', and the PEL program (and the Port Elgin facility) are important to the self-identity and pride of many union leaders and activists.

Heterodox economics and political economy topics enter the PEL curriculum through many avenues, including the Basic PEL program (which covers introductory political economy topics including the history of capitalism, the history and role of the labour movement, the determination of wages, etc.), and specialized courses in globalization, green jobs, and equity. The most intensive and sustained economics training at PEL, however, occurs through the one-week 'Economics for Trade Unionists' course, usually offered once per year to around 40 students.⁶ The course is organized around material contained in an introductory, non-technical textbook in basic political-economy (Stanford, 2008b). (Students receive the textbook and the course outline a few weeks before the course begins.)

Table 1 at the end of this article summarizes the curriculum for the course. Given its subject matter, the economics course features more formal lectures than most other PEL courses (which typically rely more heavily on participatory exercises, group work, and self-directed study). The economics instructor is accompanied by one peer educator who assists with presentation, course organization, group exercises, and other duties. There is no formal homework or student evaluation in the course. Students are required to prepare and present a 'poster' on an economic issue of their choice at the end of the week (described further below). Each student is asked to read assigned chapters of the textbook before the corresponding lecture on each topic.

The format of the course involves full-day classroom activity (from 8:30 a.m. through 4:30 p.m., including a lunch break and two coffee breaks). Students arrive at the facility on Sunday evening (when they receive an orientation to the facility and its procedures; and an introduction to the course, its goals, and the other students). They depart Port Elgin for their respective homes⁷ after lunch on the following Friday. Each full day of instruction features three 90-minute core sessions (consisting of an illustrated powerpoint lecture with class discussion), and at least two participatory exercises intended to illustrate some issue covered that day,

6 Versions of this course have also been delivered by the author through education programs offered by other trade unions, including those noted in the acknowledgements appearing at the end of this article.

7 Just over half of Unifor's members live in Ontario, and hence can generally drive to Port Elgin in their own cars; transportation for students from other parts of Canada (via air, train, or car) is provided as part of the cost of the program.

and to foster more motion, conversation, and participation in the class. Questions and discussion are encouraged even during the core sessions, which typically (as a result) do not complete all of the allotted material covered in the corresponding readings. One of the exercises each day is intended to focus on some hands-on ‘skill’ which might be concretely useful to the students’ trade union activism after the class – such as reading and interpreting labour market statistics, or finding and understanding corporate financial statements. At least one outside guest speaker is invited to join the class for a core session each week, to provide some variety in instructional voice. The peer educator assigned to the course also presents some of the material.

The theoretical and ideological perspective of the course instruction (like the accompanying textbook) is explicitly anti-neoclassical. The goal is to equip students with an enduring skepticism of traditional market-oriented economic theories and policy proposals. A broad introduction is provided to the major differences between neoclassical and heterodox economic approaches (the latter defined eclectically to include Keynesian and post-Keynesian, Marxian, structuralist, and other traditions), although only limited time is devoted to defining and contrasting specific schools of thought. Key analytical pillars of heterodox approaches are well-emphasized in the course, including:

- the nature of capitalism, and its key characteristics (namely: production for profit, and wage labour);
- the process of capitalist investment, accumulation, and growth, and the system’s reliance on profit-seeking investment by non-financial firms;
- value, wage determination, and exploitation;
- the behaviour of the capitalist labour market, and the normal existence of unemployment;
- divisions and segmentation in labour markets, and the causes and consequences of inequality;
- the nature and role of money, the unique role and power of the financial industry, and its systemic fragility;
- the historic and current role of government under capitalism, and the history and effects of neoliberalism;

- globalization, the nature and scope of international economic relationships, and the history of ‘free trade’;
- the cyclical pattern of capitalist development, and the causes and consequences of recessions and crises (including the 2008-09 global financial crisis);
- the critique of capitalism, and proposals for reforming or replacing capitalism.

This is a comprehensive and sophisticated curriculum. It is challenging to present this range of material within a one-week course, and challenging for students to learn it (many of whom have no formal post-secondary education).

Considerations in Teaching Heterodox Economics to Trade Union Members

Several insights and lessons can be gleaned from the delivery of this course that may be useful in other activist education initiatives in heterodox economics:

a) Redefine Economics as a Topic of ‘Everyday Life’

Most adult learners enter an economics classroom fearful that the entire discipline is probably too technical, mathematical, or complicated for them to understand. Yet their success in negotiating the ‘economics of everyday life’ (including holding down a job, earning a wage, and paying their family bills) is proof that they know much more about economics than they give themselves credit for. A first task in activist economics training, therefore, must be to ratify the existing knowledge of the participants about everyday economic phenomena: including employment, production, income, consumption, inflation, and more. (This is fully consistent, of course, with the core emphasis in popular education theory on situating learning endeavours within the lived experience of the learners and their community.) Economics is something we all know about, because we all must work and live in the economy. This redefinition of the subject matter leads readily into a critique of the phony authority of conventional economics – whether practiced by blue-suited bank economists quoted on the nightly news, or by orthodox economists in academia who revel in pointing out the

alleged ignorance of average people regarding the magical efficiency of supply and demand. Do those so-called ‘experts’ really know more about work, production, and consumption than the rest of us? Moreover, the legitimacy of activist economics education is further reinforced by highlighting the vested interests which motivate those experts and shape their ideas and statements; economics (and economists) are value-laden and ideological, not ‘objective’ or ‘neutral’.

The course begins by critiquing the anti-democratic nature of the ‘leave-to-the-experts’ mentality, and aiming to empower and legitimize participation by average working people in economics education. Of course, not every economic topic can be related concretely to the daily lived experience of the learners; some topics are too abstract, or too macroeconomic in nature, for learners to immediately visualize their connection to their own lives. But where it is possible, this reframing of economics as a subject of everyday life is a very useful entry-point to a discipline that most workers have been taught is somehow ‘above’ them.

b) Link Economics Learning to the Workplace

A central part of everyday life for all working people is their experience with work and production. Hence there is no more potent subject matter for learning about economics than the practices of employment, supervision, investment, and compensation that go on every day inside their workplaces. Students can readily identify the reality of the command-and-control structure that operates inside the firm where they are employed (contrasting strikingly with the idealized vision of equal, spontaneous ‘exchange’ presented in neoclassical stories).⁸ They appreciate the day-to-day micro conflicts that rage over the nature of employment and work (including specific struggles over compensation, pace, and conditions). They practically and immediately understand the forces that both motivate and constrain the actions of the firm’s owners. As trade union members, they already know that bargaining power between employers and workers is a crucial determinant of the terms of employment (not just ‘supply and demand’) – and that without collective voice and institutional power, workers will always be the underdog in

⁸ And even if they work in a public sector agency, rather than a for-profit business, they will be able to comment on the hierarchical command structure of the workplace.

that relationship (given capitalist control over investment and production decisions).

For most of the specific topic areas covered in Table 1, concrete workplace-based examples and illustrations make the subject more relevant and memorable for trade union learners; the students themselves can usually identify these examples. Emphasizing the workplace connection to economics education helps the students concretize the knowledge they are learning. Moreover, it affirms the relevance of the whole subject matter to their role as trade union activists, given unions' mission to strengthen the institutions, practices, and culture which support workers' power in the workplace (and in society).

c) Affirm the Centrality of Work in the Economy

Most streams of heterodox economics naturally emphasize work (defined broadly as any productive human activity) as the crucial ingredient in the creation and measurement of value. Highlighting the economic importance of their own labour (and all work) is therefore an obvious way to reinforce both the heterodox content of the curriculum, and the legitimacy of working people studying it in the first place (see, for example, Henderson, 2014/15). In the first lectures of the course, the economy is defined as the sum total of the work (productive human activity) that we all perform, along with the distribution and use of what is produced through that work. This approach puts workers at the front and centre of the story – in contrast to the common (mis)conception of economics as something that involves statistics, aggregates, and money. Care must be taken not to caricature the story: we do not propagate a simplistic labour theory of value, and we define productive labour inclusively (paid and unpaid, direct and indirect, even supervisory and managerial). Neither do we want to be sidetracked by needless and obscure theoretical debates (about transformation problems and so on). But, as a broad statement of economic reality, the notion that human labour is the only force that adds value to the resources and ecological benefits we harvest from nature (with due recognition that this harvesting must occur sustainably) is both intellectually credible and politically powerful.

In addition to communicating an important truth about how the economy actually works, this pedagogical focus has the added benefit of ratifying the students' status and importance in the economy (and in society). I

frequently ask students to compare the real value-added that is produced in the course of a single day of their own labour, with the real value-added produced by a stock-broker or investment dealer. No matter how seemingly menial or under-appreciated the worker's job, it is always more directly productive (in a true economic sense) than all the speculative trading on any stock market – not to mention the spillover damage to real production that results from financialization. This knowledge, and seeing where their labour fits into the cyclical flow of production and income that makes up capitalism, is both enlightening and empowering to most of the trade unionists who take this course.

d) Use Accessible Language and Presentations

It goes without saying that a key consideration in economics instruction for any non-specialist audience (and especially those who lack formal post-secondary education) is to rigorously avoid terminology, language, or instructional devices that are not immediately comprehensible to an average adult. Economists (even many heterodox economists) typically fall among the less intelligible of social scientists, and are prone to invoking jargon and shorthand to refer to complex ideas that will not be familiar to new learners. It requires careful constant attention to develop text, lectures, and illustrations that are phrased in everyday language. This is harder for the instructor than simply rattling off terms and concepts that are familiar in their academic or professional worlds. Indeed, I am convinced that many economists invoke jargon or technical language precisely because they *cannot* explain the relevant concepts in common language.

e) Mobilize Expert Knowledge, but with Caution

As noted earlier, a central concern in popular education revolves around understanding and challenging the role of the 'expert' instructor. In a heterodox economics context, we are doubly concerned with challenging the expertise of conventional economists, given the ideological function that has always been played by neoclassical economics in obscuring and legitimating capitalism. In my experience, however, trade union learners are nevertheless grateful to have 'experts' on their side of the great battle of economic ideas. Economics is traditionally infused with an (undeserved) veneer of technical mystique and complexity, and average people are encouraged explicitly to leave the whole terrain to the experts.

In the face of this deliberate disenfranchisement, it can be refreshing and empowering for activists in a trade union (or any other social movement) to learn that credible, trained economists are able to present a different view of how the economy works (in contrast to the neoclassical adulation of market forces), and to join them in advocating progressive economic change. Union learners are typically hungry to hear from those experts. Any popular education initiative must recognize, respect, and build on the existing knowledge of course participants; but it would be patronizing to pretend that expert knowledge of the instructor (and that embodied in readings and other class resources) will not be central to the teaching and learning process, given the subject matter and widespread misperceptions about its incomprehensibility. On the other hand, a central goal of activist education in heterodox economics must be to nurture a sense of independence and self-confidence among the learners; this supports their subsequent autonomous efforts to articulate and advance their own economic demands. Knowing that they have at least some 'experts' on their side can help buttress that confidence (and hence power).

The best outcome from activist education in economics, therefore, is for participants to leave the course convinced they've learned enough (including from their 'expert' instructor) to feel legitimate and confident in expressing their continuing demands for change. In this careful and nuanced way, the knowledge and credibility of our own experts (including the instructor) can play an important role in activist economics education, so long as we pay due attention to the risks of over-reliance on the expert's voice.

f) Strike a Flexible Balance Between Lectures, Discussion, and Hands-on Exercises

As indicated in Table 1, each full day of 'Economics for Trade Unionists' features three core lectures, of 90 minutes each. That constitutes an intensive day of learning for any group of students (even in a university setting). This ambitious schedule works best when the lecture format is flexible enough to allow for constant discussion, questioning, and interaction among the students. While the lecture is guided by a structure (embodied in accompanying powerpoint slides) and aims to cover a defined ground, the process must allow for questions and interaction that reinforce understanding and relevance among the students. These

lectures must be interspersed with opportunities for students to move around, work in small groups, and complete hands-on exercises. For example, the lecture on the economic role of government is followed by a small group exercise in which each table group is instructed to devise their own government budget (reflecting their respective views regarding their imaginary society's economic, fiscal, and social priorities). The only requirement is that the budget must 'add up' (so that selected criteria, such as tax, spending, and deficits are mutually consistent, all measured as shares of GDP). Another guided small-group exercise involves examining United Nations Development Program rankings of human development for selected countries, and analyzing the very imperfect link between GDP and human well-being. This hands-on exercise reinforces, with real world data, the core heterodox point that merely producing more (especially when production is guided by the profit motive) is no guarantee that human living conditions will improve. These exercises can even incorporate simple mathematic tasks (usually described in a guided worksheet), since most adult learners possess basic numeracy skills (and generally, these days, carry smart phones with calculator functions). In my experience, when used carefully, these simple statistical exercises help to reinforce the key notion that economics (even when math and statistics enter the picture) is indeed a topic that average working people can, and should, be competent in.

g) Avoid Undue Focus on Doctrines and Debates

Most heterodox economists love debate and conflict; it's part of what attracted us to alternative schools of thought in the first place. And a summary overview of the history of economic thought (and the debates that shaped that history) can be a useful entry point for stressing the non-objective, contestable, ideological nature of economics. However, few adult learners will be intrigued or inspired by fine categorizations of economic schools of thought – such as is common in much heterodox literature. Heterodox writers often describe in great detail how our approaches differ from neoclassical precepts (and go into even more detail explaining why and how various heterodox streams differ *from each other*). In an activist education setting, this detailed focus on doctrinal categories and comparisons is more likely to confuse than illuminate.

My course presents a simple summary of the main assumptions of neoclassical theory (in particular its assumption of self-adjusting and efficient markets for all commodities, including labour and capital). More importantly, I emphasize that neoclassical economics has always played an ideological and legitimating role (especially in regard to the claim that profits represent a fair and efficient return to productive 'capital,' rather than a surplus that is appropriated by a privileged social class). I then describe the main features of an ecumenical, inclusive heterodox alternative: a focus on social classes, power, and historical change; recognition of unemployment as a normal economic outcome; and acknowledgement that capitalism is a stage in history, not a natural or permanent state of affairs. This may be annotated, depending on student interest, with a simple review of major heterodox thinkers (usually just Marx, Keynes, and Kalecki). Beyond that, I am reluctant to delve more deeply into the history of thought and doctrinal disputes – whether between neoclassical and heterodox schools, or between competing heterodox approaches. It is more productive to focus on describing a broad, accessible, pragmatic portrait of the economy that reflects the lived reality of the learners.

h) Emphasize the Social and Political Choices Embodied in Economic Practices, and Link Economics Learning to Broader Political and Social Struggles

Heterodox economists always reject the assumption that economic outcomes are neutral, natural, or inevitable. We characterize economic activity rightly as a *social* activity, requiring interaction with other human beings in many different ways. (There is no such thing, for example, as a 'self-made millionaire'!) Institutions that are described in neoclassical models as natural or inevitable (including 'markets' themselves) are in fact socially constructed, time- and place-contingent, contestable features of society. Merely acknowledging that economic outcomes reflect social and political choices (rather than natural or objective forces) is an inherently subversive concept – because it

immediately opens the possibility that we might make *different* social and political choices.⁹

It is especially important to emphasize these dimensions of relativity and contestability in an activist education setting. Trade union learners are not interested solely in learning about the economy; they indeed want to change it. Most became active in their union precisely because they were offended by the current state of affairs (whether in their workplace, in their community, or on their planet), and hence were motivated to work for change. For these students, learning definitively that nothing in the present-day economy is pre-ordained or inevitable ratifies their personal sense of mission. And for them, it is an easy next step to link their new knowledge about economics to concrete social change movements (including, but not limited to, participation in their union). As noted in the popular education literature surveyed above, this emphasis on connecting education to activism is not just important for movement-building. It also plays a direct cognitive role, by assisting adult learners to learn and internalize the material (building on the foundation of their pre-existing personal interest in social change).¹⁰

i) “If You Could Change One Thing”

One of the most gratifying parts of the week-long course (for both students and instructors) is a poster project that concludes at the end of the program. The assignment is simple and flexible: each student is asked to prepare a poster (presented on large-format posterboard) dealing with any economic-related issue that interests or concerns them (including issues experienced within a workplace, a household, in a community, or in the environment). They are asked to refer to some idea or ideas covered in the course instruction or the textbook, and to advance a policy proposal or demand as part of the presentation. The project is

9 The hands-on exercises, involving construction of an imaginary government budget and the comparison of different countries according to the UNDP human development index (both described above), are designed to emphasize this broad assertion that societies make choices about the type of economy in which we live and work .

10 Directly connecting education to activism is a preoccupation throughout all of the courses offered through the PEL program. For example, the basic four-week PEL course includes a student assignment requiring them to organize an activist event around some issue back in their own community.

called 'If you could change one thing', thus making an explicit link between economics education and social and political activism.¹¹ The students work on their posters throughout the week, may ask the instructor or peer educator for assistance, and are encouraged to conduct external research on their topic (using the Port Elgin facility's well-equipped computer lab and labour library). The posters themselves may incorporate text, bullet points, photos, drawings, graphs, infographics, and/or slogans and headings. Students present their posters over two sessions at the end of the week. Each student gives a 5-minute presentation of their concern, their research, and their proposal/demand, followed by questions from the other students. After each presentation, the poster is stuck on a wall of the classroom; the collection of student posters eventually composes a montage of economic and political activism, taking up one whole wall of the class. (The posters are left up for the last day of the week, and students from other PEL courses are invited to view the wall.)

This exercise emphasizes the desired connection between economics training and political activism. It also provides students with direct experience in researching, presenting, and advocating specific proposals (which should serve them well in their subsequent activism). It also directly confronts and debunks the assumption that only 'experts' can credibly understand and comment on economic issues. The posters are therefore a tangible illustration that with a bit of training – and, more importantly, with the confidence that comes from personal participation in a collective, activist-oriented program of instruction – any concerned person can become an 'expert' on economic issues that affect them and their community.

Conclusion

Virtually every social change movement must confront a series of predictable economic counter-arguments. The movement's opponents will claim its demands are unfeasible, unsustainable, unaffordable, or inefficient. The phony authority of mainstream economists, combined with the power of the institutions where most of them work (banks, governments, business associations, and orthodox economics

11 This title borrows from the phraseology of Baines (2006).

departments), impart these claims with more influence than they deserve. Progressive activists may be daunted or intimidated by the seeming array of economic hurdles facing their cause. Basic training in popular economics can equip them with arguments, and more importantly the confidence, to confront and overcome these barriers. More positively, popular economics education can enhance the sense of legitimacy and confidence which social change activists wield in their respective struggles. And knowing economics should be strategically useful in identifying the most promising avenues and opportunities for winning change – and imbuing activists with a historical confidence that change can and will be won. For all these reasons, activist education in critical, heterodox economics should be an important priority for any progressive social movement.

The trade union movement, given the central importance of work and employment in most peoples' lives, and the institutional power of unions, is an especially important venue for popular economics education initiatives. But an activist pedagogy in economics is valuable in many other social movement settings as well: including anti-poverty, environmental, and equity-seeking campaigns.

The benefit of economics training for activists extends beyond the particular economic knowledge that learners gain (about particular economic issues or debates), and beyond specific applied skills that may be acquired (although some of those concrete skills, like learning to find and understand corporate financial statements, do have practical activist applications). The biggest benefit, rather, is more indirect and diffuse. The more that activists understand the ideological, contested nature of economics, and the biased and ideological role played by economists, the better they will be able to inoculate themselves and their movements against efforts by ruling elites to belittle and defeat their demands.¹² Basic education in heterodox economics can contribute to a broad, general confidence among social movement activists that their demands are both legitimate and feasible. They will feel more capable in conducting their own simple economic research, making presentations, advocating proposed solutions, and invoking economic arguments to support their cause. They will know that 'expert' economic opinion is

12 This argument is reminiscent of Joan Robinson's famous dictum that "the purpose of studying economics is ... to learn how to avoid being deceived by economists" (Robinson, 1980: 17).

never unanimous nor truly scientific – and, at any rate, that there are ‘experts’ on their side, too. In this way, systematic education in heterodox economics for activists (in trade unions, and any other movement) can make an enduring contribution to a stronger and more confident constellation of social change campaigns.

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