MAKING IT EXPLICIT:

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROGRAMS IN POLITICAL ECONOMY PEDAGOGY

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I have a clear memory of the series of models of the atom taught to high schoolers. First, there was Rutherford and Bohr's usual, familiar concentric rings or shells of electrons whirling about the nucleus, each ring holding a set number of electrons, and the electrons filling each ring from the inside out. The model here is a determinate arrangement of a positively charged nucleus and rationally arranged electron shells. The chief flaw of the Rutherford–Bohr model is that it is false. The revelations of quantum physics (*viz.* wave-particle duality, uncertainty principle) indicated that electrons are better understood as atomic orbitals within a cloud of probability. I wondered, then, why we were taught something only to be told a year later to forget everything we had learned. Why teach something false if you know perfectly well you will teach something true later on?

This confusion became sensible through the lens of Karl Popper's concept of falsification (Popper [1959] 2002). For Popper, the procedure of scientific development requires theories to propose hypotheses that, in principle, can be tested and falsified. Discovering that a hypothesis is false is evidence against a theory. Likewise, the physics teachers of my youth were engaged in a pedagogical procedure which required me to learn models that would be tested and falsified. The virtue of this way of teaching is that it enables simpler models to be absorbed before revising these insights within a more complex model. But this requires the series of falsified models to be sufficiently related to enable insights to transfer from the one to the next; and it requires a difficult, if rewarding, procedure for

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the student of detangling what is false and what is true. This falsificationist procedure for pedagogy assumes, too, that there is a necessary and rational development of learning the material, which will approach truth, in the limit.

Orthodox economics programs approximate something like this falsificationist pedagogy.[1] First years walk into a lecture hall for introductory microeconomics, where they learn the supply/demand cross as a theoretical construct; in second year, they study intermediate micro, where they dip into the real world, where supply and demand relationships are far more complex. However, in heterodox economics or political economy teaching, we are typically much more interested in stewarding students towards an open-minded capacity to develop their own body of theory and opinion. There is no obligatory sequence of Introductory Value Theory into Intermediate Value Theory, no progressive revision of falsified models across our teaching. The pluralist nature of the field is not directly conducive to a progression of content that approaches truth. Probably the nearest we approach to falsification as pedagogy is when we turn to intellectual history of schools of thought, comparing them over time.

Currently, most teaching in political economy is characterised by open-mindedness or pluralism, as various commentators have pointed out, including in this volume. Luciano Carment (2026) has suggested that pluralism by juxtaposition is the main method of heterodox economics teaching: that is to say, different schools of thought are presented to students as more or less coherent, if contrasting, wholes. The expectation is that students can pick and choose concepts and tools from these schools with which they can understand and analyse the world. Carment argues, however, that students end up over-emphasising the philosophical differences between schools of thought, especially between neoclassical theory and all other heterodox approaches. The outcome in the latter case is that students are anointed as 'ontological warriors': where students are entrained into adversarial thinkers, aimed at reproducing a school of thought, rather than engaged and critical thinkers. In this sense, falsificationist pedagogy rears its head primarily in falsifying neoclassical theory.

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[1] Although this is less true of the discipline itself; to the extent that mainstream economists have shifted away from the models that they nevertheless teach. See, for example: Colander *et al.* (2004).

At the same time, the 'unlearning' of mainstream concepts – or, in Gramscian terms of 'common sense' – is a crucial element of teaching heterodox and radical economics. For Gramsci, common sense in capitalist society refers to the ways in which people understand the situations in which they find themselves (Bruff 2011). These many and varied common senses are part of the ideological experience that students (and instructors) live within and which come into the classroom with us.

In my own teaching, I frequently begin by asking the class to collectively assemble some commonsense idea so that we can question its underlying assumptions and ideological functions. But the expulsion of mainstream ideas can implicitly set up a new common sense with a core set of axioms across the curriculum that students absorb, and for which students are rewarded with Distinctions and High Distinctions if they grasp these secret axioms and rehearse them in their papers. In practice, what this means is that students might re-use the same criticisms of representative agents (for example) in essays across different units on gender, uneven development, or monetary theory. Because of the diversity amongst faculty and the commitment to pluralism, these secret axioms are generally limited to some commonalities in the philosophy of social science.

It is this combination of the social milieu and hierarchical grading systems that students encounter which pushes them towards becoming ontological warriors, not just the critique of neoclassical theory on philosophical grounds (for an alternative to hierarchical grading, see: Ramnarain and Santucci 2025).

But these outcomes should not be laid wholly at the feet of instructors: students are not (and should not be) passive receptacles but active participants. Their engagement with our material will be shaped by their own experiences: for example, Groenewald and van Rensburg (2025) discuss how South African students bounced off developmental state theory because of their perspectives on government corruption. They engage a feminist and decolonial pedagogy that positions the classroom, including its curriculum, as open to dialogue and revision from students. The question that they ask us is how to guide students' capacity and potential as co-learners and as social agents capable of shaping the world. Students in my own teaching have included, for example, people interested in the global political economy and the organisation of power, but differently motivated by pro-BRICS realignments of power or anti-imperialist critiques of uneven development. Most students come to

political economy carrying some kind of criticism of public and political commentary about the economy or its contemporary functioning. They need not be radicals or activists for this to be true: a sense of injustice, a disquiet with inequality or financialisation, experiences of alienation in the workplace, or an opposition to American global dominance can suffice. The alternative perspective that political economy offers, therefore, will equip them one way or another for a critique of how things are. The trick is to follow-through on this understanding with an analysis of how things might change.

My chief point is that our programs of education in political economy necessarily have an implicit paradigm of heterodox economics pedagogy. I mean paradigm in the Kuhnian sense: the contextual assumptions, methods, and discourses that constitute 'normal science' and within which science solves puzzles (Kuhn [1962] 1996). Likewise, there is a normal pedagogy that emerges across a whole program and in dialogue with the interests, experiences, histories, and situations of our students: that is to say, an individual teacher is just one player in the making of a pedagogical paradigm. If we wish to remake this paradigm, even a little bit, it is necessary to make it explicit, to ourselves and to our students, in order to connect the critique of how things are to analyses of how to effect change. In this respect, Carment's contribution drives at important questions around how well we are served by the central focus on an implicit canon of criticism that stresses essentially methodological questions.[2]

For Carment, part of the solution is to turn to pluralism by integration – teaching through problems or questions and drawing on diverse concepts and tools to model a 'pick-and-choose' pluralism. But shifting our method of pluralist teaching alone may not make explicit the underlying paradigm or transform it. The outcome might be described as what Young (2020) calls unengaged pluralism: an in-principle commitment to pluralist inclusion without any justification for its limits (or lack of limits). *Pro forma* inclusion leads to intellectual fragmentation between sub-traditions that are nominally pluralist with one another but in practice do not speak to each other. The upshot here is that pluralism, to operate successfully, always requires limits. Those limits form key elements of the basic

[2] I say this as someone whose work and interests include philosophical and methodological questions. Do not mistake me as denying the significance of these issues.

paradigm of a heterodox teaching program; and this paradigm must be explicit, justifiable, and revisable.

One way of making things explicit is to think through teaching – and explain it to students – in terms of Lakatosian research programs (Lakatos 1970). For Lakatos, scientific communities contain competing research programs that each have an inviolable nucleus of basic axioms surrounded by a 'protective belt' of auxiliary hypotheses, subject to testing and change. A research program is degenerating if it only develops new theories to explain facts whereas it is progressive if it predicts new (and interesting) facts by its theories. That is to say, the contact between theory and the world runs in both directions, rather than mere reflection. Teaching schools of thought through their progressive research programs enlivens the social purpose of pedagogy, because it demands at least some relation to the world. But we can also understand teaching directly through Lakatosian pedagogical programs: containing their own nucleus of axioms, concentric rings of auxiliary hypotheses, and progressive or degenerate. In this sense, a degenerate pedagogical program is one which loses this crucial relation with the world.

One proposal for accomplishing this, emerging from these arguments, is that the classroom must be doubly historicised.[3] First, the material, content, methods, and topics of the classroom should be situated within the intellectual and ideological context of their origins and the present moment. In other words, it must be situated in terms of a Gramscian common sense. Second, the student cohort (and teacher) must be historicised in terms of their own experiences, classes, racialisation, gender, and so on. In a trite sense, this is just to say that a teacher must know their audience, and vice versa. This engagement between student and teacher is what bell hooks calls 'engaged pedagogy,' as part of her attempt to articulate education as liberation. She argues that '[t]o educate for freedom, then, we have to challenge and change the way everyone thinks about pedagogical process'. This much is true, although in *Teaching to Transgress* hooks tends to emphasise education as a practice of freedom internal to the classroom rather than its role in shaping the conditions of freedom beyond the classroom.

[3] Thanks to Dr Anna Sturman for this turn of phrase.

These considerations lead me to propose that a progressive pedagogical program for heterodox economics should be seen as one through which students enter into a *transformative relation* with the world. The terms of this transformation are highly variable between students and across cohorts, of course, and this is one sphere in which we must be expressly pluralist. Outside of this evaluative criterion for heterodox economics pedagogy, however, I think there is enormous room for manoeuvre, primarily conditional on the material and ideological contexts of our classrooms.

Currently, threats to intellectual freedom, most especially on questions of Palestine, loom large across the globe. Beyond issues of managerial or state domination, however, there are rosier outlooks. There is substantial room for pluralism within departments, even in how to conceive of pedagogical programs, but my key point is that these programs should be articulated explicitly to students. There is an intellectual and ethical obligation that demands us to be explicit about our pedagogical 'hard core' of axioms, within the context of a pluralist approach (or even if not!) as well as our linkages through to the question of what is to be done in the world, not only in the classroom (Stilwell and Thornton 2022; Pérez and Wang 2025).

I think we like to imagine that we equip students with concepts and techniques to change the world, and that this will happen five, ten or fifteen years post-graduation. But this fantasy of post-figuration abstains from the duties of the present: to think through the crises and questions of the *now* in the classroom, and what strategies for transformation might look like *now*. It is even entirely possible – and it has been done before – for at least some class content and assessments to be directed towards shaping real-world transformation. Yes, some theoretical development and abstract considerations require a little time-out from the concrete and the material. And yes, it is true that every moment is equally urgent, but it is also true that our present is first amongst urgencies.

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