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Pedagogical pluralism in undergraduate urban economics education

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ABSTRACT

Although it is widely held that pedagogical pluralism could transform urban economics education, to date, it remains unclear how urban economics students actually experience pluralism. Drawing on a range of evidence, including subject outlines, surveys, and student debates, this paper shows that pedagogical pluralism in urban economics education could substantially enhance the quality of student learning in terms of developing their critical thinking skills, increasing their awareness of, and strengthening their personal commitment to social justice. Pedagogical pluralism in urban economics education could, therefore, contribute to nurturing a new cadre of economists whose repertoire of concerns includes citizenship.

1. Introduction

Most economists, especially those of a neoclassical orientation, are either dismissive or patronising of pluralist economics and political economy education. Strategies to keep the pedagogical challenge to the mainstream at the margin are wide-ranging. Aside from the widely-researched, more hostile strategies of not hiring political economy staff, or frustrating those who are hired (Butler et al., 2009), there are many others.

Three of them require emphasis because they are widespread. The first is to claim that pluralist economics is immature. So, some three decades ago, pluralist economics education was held to be undeveloped, leading J.J. Siegfried and Rendigs Fels to observe, in an extensive survey of research on teaching economics, as follows: ‘We regret the omission of radical economics. Radical economists have criticized orthodox economics teaching severely and have published discussions of alternative approaches. But to the best of our knowledge, they have not done enough research on the results to warrant inclusion here’ (Siegfried and Fels, 1979, p. 924). With the number of articles on pedagogy in pluralist economics increasingly being published in this and other journals such as the *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, this strategy has become increasingly ineffective, but it continues in a new guise: labelling pluralist economics as ‘unscientific’ (Dow, 2019).

A second strategy is to contend that mainstream economics education has already undergone major transformations and, hence, there is no need for pedagogical pluralism (for a detailed review, see Thornton, 2015; Elsner, 2019). This strategy too has received robust responses from political economists, especially Tim Thornton. Through a systematic analysis of the content of orthodox economics textbooks and syllabi at different universities around the world, Thornton (2015) shows that the alleged transformation of mainstream economics is just that: an allegation. Indeed, the evidence strongly shows that the core contents of economics education have remained largely the same.

A third tactic is more patronising. By this approach, because pedagogical pluralism is so ‘advanced’, it must only be introduced to

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students after they have mastered the ‘fundamentals’ (read mainstream economics) of economics education at the undergraduate level. As William Waller (2012, p. 639) notes in his contribution to the *International Handbook on Teaching and Learning Economics*, ‘... teaching political economy before intermediate theory courses tends to be confusing than helpful for undergraduate students. They need to know mainstream theory to understand why heterodox economists proposed alternatives’.

Political economists have tried to respond to this third claim in various fields of economics (see, for example, Mearman, 2011, 2014; Thornton, 2014; Argyrous and Thornton, 2014; Schneider, 2013; Stilwell, 2012; Decker et al., 2019), but not in urban economics. Indeed, pluralist economists have paid relatively little attention to urban economics teaching and, sometimes, even suggested that pluralist urban economics should not be a focus for political economists. As Stuart Birks (2015, p. 326) notes of an urban economics chapter in a book on ‘challenging the orthodoxy’, ‘It might have been written for a more select audience’.

However, a challenge to mainstream urban economics education is needed. As has recently been noted in the *Review of Radical Political Economics*, ‘Neoclassical urban economics handles the analysis of urban physical space poorly. For a subfield defined by geography, that is a major problem’ (Scalar, 2018, p. 1). Indeed, as the world economy is now an urban economy, the inadequacies of the neoclassical approach have become compounded. Reflecting on the empirical challenges and prospects of pedagogical pluralism is important for these reasons. In the context of what Tim Thornton (2015) has called ‘the intellectual isolation of mainstream economics’, alternatives must resolve ‘the contradiction between the plurality of the discipline and the singularity of student induction into it’ (Denis, 2009, p. 6).

Pedagogical pluralism in urban economics must be reflected in three parts of the subject: content, actual teaching style, and assessments (Denis, 2009; Thornton, 2015, 2017; Schneider, 2013; Stanford, 2008, 2017). The contents of the subject must include topics often taught in mainstream urban economics, but they should also embrace other topics (e.g., race, gender, inequality) that are usually neglected in urban economics subjects. More fundamentally, the content must not only *entertain*, but it should also *encourage*, a critical dialogue among diverse schools of thought in (e.g., neoclassical economics, Marxist economics, institutional economics, and Georgist land economics), a point recently emphasised by Sheila Dow (2019). Indeed, teachers can borrow useful educational ideas from other academic disciplines, including geography and sociology, as well as non-academic fields and societies. Pedagogical pluralism in urban economics must also develop a non-functionalist alternative to the functionalist lecture method that characterises mainstream economics teaching (Eckenrod and Holahan, 2004; Ardalan, 2018). If so, the assessment must similarly go beyond the emphasis on examinations, especially recall-type testing which tends to encourage rote learning. Pluralist assessments must embrace a wider range of tasks to develop, and to nurture, broader graduate attributes (O’Donnell, 2010), including critical thinking and critical writing skills.

These desiderata raise three difficult questions for advocates of an alternative urban economics teaching. First, in what ways can non-mainstream urban economics subjects be designed? Second, how can pedagogical pluralism in urban economics be taught and assessed? Third, what do students think of such urban economics subjects and, hence, what lessons can these experiences offer for urban economics pedagogy?

The rest of the article is a critical reflection on my experiences as an urban economics teacher at a university in Australia. In doing so, I rely on student feedback surveys (SFS), the limitations of which are well-known (Richardson, 2005; Nulty, 2008; Nowell et al., 2014). They tend to be polarised, often inviting comments from either the most highly motivated students or the most disgruntled students, while leaving out the more moderate, or middle-ground, students. Also, the response rates of such surveys tend to be quite low and comments can be influenced by the timing of the survey, for example, whether it is just after the students have received excellent, or tough, grading. Indeed, questionnaires, administered by universities, tend to be generic, raising questions about whether the same questions should be asked to all students or whether the same weight should be given to the ratings of all students, (for example diligent and truant students and truants). These limitations curtail the effectiveness of using results from (student feedback surveys (SFS).

Yet, this pedagogical auto ethnography approach has been successfully used by leading political economists (Stilwell, 2011; O’Donnell, 2010; Schneider, 2013). In such cases, teachers have minimised the weaknesses of the SFS tool by using a range of student surveys, interviews, student reflections, and peer review of teaching materials to gain feedback on their teaching. In addition, they have combined online surveys, administered by universities, and in-class surveys, administered by students. Together with using these mitigation strategies, the current study seeks to further reduce the limitations of the SFS by using six-year-data-series for which the average response rate was close to 50 per cent.

The case study shows that pedagogical pluralism in urban economics education could substantially enhance the quality of student learning. While students find pedagogical pluralism intellectually tasking, and lacking in providing ‘pure’ economics training, overall, students who have taken the subject express both appreciation for, and interest in, pedagogical pluralism in urban economics education. In particular, students value the strong emphases of this pedagogy on critical thinking. By increasing the awareness of, and augmenting students’ personal commitment to, social justice, pedagogical pluralism in urban economics education could contribute to nurturing a new cadre of economists whose repertoire of concerns includes citizenship.

The rest of the article is divided into three sections. *Reclaiming Pedagogical Pluralism in Urban Economics* (section 1) highlights the posited benefits of pedagogical pluralism and presents Urban Economics (16235) as one case of how pluralism might be achieved in the design of content, teaching methods, and assessments to achieve such posited benefits. *Student Experiences* (section 2) presents evidence of how students have experienced the subject. The last section, *Reconstructing Urban Economics*, reflects on the lessons from section 2 to inform urban economics teaching more widely.

2. Reclaiming pedagogical pluralism in urban economics

Pedagogical Pluralism is the anti-thesis of pedagogical monism, which characterises mainstream urban economics teaching (Beckenbach, 2019). Political economists give three reasons for reclaiming pedagogical pluralism (Schneider, 2013; Obeng-Odoom, 2016; Stilwell, 2017a,b, 2018; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017; Sclar, 2018; Decker et al., 2019). The first is that pluralism is essential to develop students' critical analytical skills to avoid what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) has called the 'Danger of a Single Story', or the idea that all useful insights come from only one school of economics: neoclassical urban economics. Instead, pluralism develops students' competencies in evaluating multiple schools of thought in their *engagement* with the mainstream. Such engagement takes three forms, namely critical perspectives on (a) mainstream economics (b) its alternatives and (c) wider urban studies literatures. So, critical thinking is *fundamental* to pluralism. Pedagogical pluralism, then, plays a key role in empowering students to appreciate the complexities of urban society, economy, and environment.

Increasing student awareness of social justice, as a response to the multiple social injustices in the city (for a discussion of social (in)justice in the city, see George, 1883/1981; George, 1883; Lefebvre, 1974; Harvey, 1973, 2012) and, as a more comprehensive criterion than efficiency, growth, and other more familiar benchmarks, is a second strength of pedagogical pluralism. The benchmarks for success often utilised in mainstream urban economics are not necessarily worse criteria, but social justice provides a focus that sees growth, for example, not as a point of arrival. Instead, social justice considers growth as a point for further analysis. In this sense, prioritising growth is arbitrary and consequential; prioritising justice is not because justice implies engagement with growth and efficiency, while inviting a wider, more inclusive analysis. On the other hand, if we reflexively asked: is it efficient? Or does this urban policy foster growth? We would tend not to ask other questions. Indeed, the framework of justice could enable us to see particular triumphs, and failures, that are not necessarily '(in)efficient'.

The final reason for reclaiming pedagogical pluralism is that it could help to increase students' personal commitment to challenging injustices in urban society. Thus, it is possible that, by explicitly embracing pluralism, the well-known process in which economics students become even more selfish after studying economics (see, for example, Frey and Meier, 2003; Cipriani et al., 2009; Bauman and Rose, 2011) could be modified. Indeed, earlier research (Stilwell, 2006, 2011) suggests that students could remain self-interested, but they could *also become* more aware of, and personally commit (more) to, social justice.

These posited analytical and political benefits were echoed in a recent special issue of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* (2017, vol. 76, no. 3) on 'Revisiting Higher Education' (for an overview, see Cobb, 2017). For example, in contributing to the issue, Stephen Rowe, a philosopher, notes that:

From repeated engagement in a process that involves questioning of oneself and others, we emerge as different persons. We are transformed. We know ourselves in a new way that is not self-centred; we are fully involved in the world but not co-opted by it; we continue to seek our private ends, but we are now more cooperative and respectful of the relationships in which transformation becomes possible. In all of these ways, we learn to balance our own aims with the common good (Rowe, 2017, p. 606).

This idea that pedagogical pluralism is a cornerstone of citizenship characterised much urban economics teaching in the very early days of the subject's development. Thus, leading political economists, such as R.T. Ely, gave lectures that emphasised the 'social' character of the economics of towns and cities (Ely, 1902; 1938/, 2011). Then, the key analytical basis of the subject was institutional economics (Obeng-Odoom, 2016, chapter 1), but this would expand in the 1970s and the 1990s to include more radical economics pedagogy that emphasised currents such as Marxist and radical feminist political economy (Bridges and Hartmann, 1975). In the United States, radical urban economists (e.g., Matthew Edel) sought to develop pedagogical pluralism in their lifetime, or when they were active teachers, much like in Australia where, until his retirement, the leading urban economist, Frank Stilwell, gave classes on 'Political Economy of Cities and Regions' at the University of Sydney. Geography departments provided a space for wider reflections on cities and sometimes teamed up with economists such as John Pullen of the University of New England, to teach urban economics as a social science. However, with the retirement of such economists, it has increasingly become rare to find such pedagogically plural urban economics subjects on offer.

Urban economics and the wider economics discipline have become increasingly mainstreamed (Baumont and Huriot, 2000; Denis, 2009). Today, judging by the content of the leading urban economics textbooks (see, for example Brueckner, 2011; O'Sullivan, 2012), published teaching philosophies in the *Journal of Economic Education* (see, for example, Eckenrod and Holahan, 2004); subject outlines (see, for example, Brueckner, 2011), and reviews of textbooks/subject outlines (e.g., Obeng-Odoom, 2016, chapter 1), it can be said that urban economics pedagogy is characterised by pedagogical monism. The problems with this approach are well-known (see, for example, Obeng-Odoom, 2016, chapter 1). The empirical task is to ascertain whether pedagogical pluralism in urban economics education could address these problems (a) without reducing standards or satisfaction levels (b) while developing the critical thinking skills of students (c) increasing students' awareness of social justice and (d) enhancing students' commitment to taking action about social justice (Schneider, 2013; Obeng-Odoom, 2016; Sclar, 2018) – as claimed by political economists.

Describing the content Urban Economics (16235) is a necessary first step to addressing these questions. As I taught this subject as a pedagogically pluralist urban economics study unit, reflecting on its content can provide some clarity about what a pluralist urban economics subject could entail.

(a) Content

A compulsory subject offered to property economics students in their second and third years in an Australian university, Urban Economics (16235) is taken by about 100 students every year. The subject examines the economics of cities and regions. Seeking to enable students to understand, and to critically apply core concepts, theories, and tools to urban development processes and urban

policy making within the built environment, the subject is one of its kind within the property economics programme. While emphasising that economic forces shape the urban experience, the subject also stresses that the urban economy is part of; not apart from; the national and global world system. Indeed, the subject thrives on the interconnections between urban, rural, and peri-urban spaces within the network of cities, nations, and continents that make up the world system. The 'economic' in the subject is, therefore, taught as enmeshed in a web of complex social and ecological experiences. Themes covered include the urban economy, urban housing, transport, and sustainability. Growth, inequality, and poverty are cross-cutting themes, but they are also taught as topics (Urban Economics, Unit of Study Outline 2017, p. 1). Most of the students who take the subject are local, Australian students, but there are also many international students in attendance.

Using a dialogical pedagogical approach, inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), students are actively encouraged to hold economics as a field of dialogue. Diverse schools in economics (e.g., Marxist economics, Georgist land economics, and institutional economics) are brought in conversation with one another and, hence, with mainstream neoclassical/new institutional urban economics. These dialogues are stretched to include disciplines such as planning and construction, and non-discipline sources of ideas such as the property industry. Most of the students work while studying, so there is encouragement to reflect on their work (usually in property development), their place as workers, as members of the family of property developers, or as aspirant property developers, public sector workers, and potential researchers.

The subject is problem-based. So, in the first class, urban problems are highlighted, the various approaches to addressing them clarified, and the inadequacies of the orthodoxy dialogically established. Alternative approaches are presented and similarly critiqued, paving the way for discussing a more eclectic pluralist approach. Using this approach does not signal a point of arrival. Rather, it is an invitation for a broader vision of society which accepts dialogue and debate, explicitly encouraging dissent and reconstruction.

Urban analysis is taught as part of; not apart from, wider political economic analysis. So, multiple concepts of space (e.g., absolute, relative, or relational) are used. Thus, in terms of vision, the subject uses justice (socio-spatial, economic, and ecological) and, in terms of intellectual influences, it is pluralist and transdisciplinary, as well as multi-scalar and global in terms of geography. The unit of analysis is the intersectionality of race, class, gender and other institutions including, but not limited to, the firm. The focus is not simply on the state, or the market, but also institutions such as the commons.

Prioritising comprehensive education over narrow techniques, the subject simultaneously encourages taking mainstream economics seriously, but critically, while enabling students to look for, and articulate, alternative views. In this exercise, not only critiques, but also constructive dialogues, are encouraged. With justice as the vision, the subject also seeks to encourage students to develop interest in political institutions such as trade unions, green think tanks, and political parties. Urban Economics (16235) is, therefore, also urban political economy.

- *Teaching Approach*

Pluralist content is matched with a pluralist teaching style in this subject. As boldly stated in the subject outline distributed to students, the subject is taught through interactive lectures, tutorials, and debates. It encourages the collision and confrontation of theories, controversies, and contests. In the three-hour class, about 50 min each is devoted to lectures, tutorials, and debate between opposing student groups. About 10 min short breaks are given to facilitate more interaction and rest. Flipped learning is a cross-cutting pedagogic practice: students are required to do at least two readings and answer related questions before coming to class. While in class, students lead the discussion on the readings. The debates focus on contemporary urban economics controversies and are also led by students. In these debates, students can be debaters, engaged members of the audience, judges, or time-keepers. Therefore, independent and critical student-based can be said to be a central pedagogic practice (Urban Economics, Unit of Study Outline 2017, p. 2). The urban economics subject is done with both letters and numbers, as well as figures. So, the subject is verbal, numerical, and graphical.

In all aspects of teaching, the mainstream thinking is taken seriously, but so are its rival schools of thought. In turn, both the standard mainstream urban economics textbook and others that confront it are set as recommended reading. Arthur O' Sullivan's textbook, *Urban Economics* (2012), is recommended as exemplar of the orthodox urban economics approach to cities (on the appropriateness of this reading as a mainstream text, see [Koechlin, 2014](#), p. 452). Frank [Stilwell's *Understanding Cities and Regions* \(1992\)](#), considered by a teacher of urban studies to be pioneering in alternative approaches to urban economics ([Gleeson, 2014](#)), is also a set text. The more recent book, *Reconstructing Urban Economics: Towards a Political Economy of the Built Environment* (2016), recommended as 'worthwhile for readers who seek a heterodox perspective on urban economics' by a teacher of urban economics, [F.H. Smith \(2017\)](#), is a third recommended text. Additional readings from mainstream urban economics outlets such as *Journal of Urban Economics*, articles from radical economics journals such as *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* and *Feminist Economics*, as well as readings in planning and geography such as *Environment and Planning A* are required study texts. Likewise, publications from activist groups, such as Planka. Nu, and interest groups, such as UN-HABITAT, are required readings. The work of minorities (e.g., women and writers in the Global South) is taken seriously in this subject.

In every class, the lecture sets the scene with a problem and evaluates competing approaches to the urban problem. This hour of lecture is followed by another hour of tutorial during which students and teacher discuss two readings written from contrasting schools of thought. Then, the class breaks into a debate in the last hour during which students would engage the issues in the lectures and the readings, but they would also seek to transcend them.

These in-class activities are mutually reinforcing. They are also designed to complement pre-class activities. For example, the lecture slides, readings, and tutorial questions are provided to the students at the beginning of the semester. The lecture slides strive

to strike a balance between providing full lecture notes and giving just enough detail to prepare the students for classes. An overview of the issues for study is broadcast on the university interactive interface before the actual class. These strategies are the product of several years of dialoguing with students, whether before (e.g., at information nights), during (e.g., in lectures), or after graduation (e.g., in invited lunch meetings). These dialogues with students in the urban economics class have also influenced the nature of student assessments.

- *Assessments*

These assessment tasks are designed to reinforce the subject content and how it is taught. Tutorial questions seek to draw out the key lessons of each class: taking the mainstream ideas seriously by being able (i) to understand them, (ii) to appreciate the philosophical underpinnings of mainstream urban economics concepts, and (iii) to analyse their logical policy orientations. In addition, tutorial questions seek to elicit student engagement, tasking them to think through alternative theories, concepts, or policy suggestions. Recognising the political character of economics, the tutorial questions usually seek students' input into how best to drive change and maintain continuity. Debates are rather different. They are meant to get the students to work in groups to defend or, to contest, propositions.

Examination in urban economics hardly asks recall questions. Instead, questions tend to require the students to synthesise what they have studied, apply pluralist urban economics to their everyday life, and to think through how best to transcend existing urban conditions. As an example, in 2016, students were asked to 'Distinguish between the Ricardian and Georgist theories of rent, determining how the latter conception can be used to analyse the current global migration crisis'. In examination questions, the interaction of both the general, and the particular, the need to triangulate sources of evidence, and be able to classify diverse points of view, while engaging all of them is stressed. Because the motions of debate sometimes ooze into the examination questions, students are recurrently encouraged to share or exchange the research they do for their own debate. This way, instead of preparing for eleven separate debate motions (with twenty-two sets of 'for' and 'against' arguments), there is a strong incentive to share in order to receive. Urban Economics examinations, then, are designed to help minimise potential problems such as free riding in group work or to curtail the problem of hoarding.

- *Reciprocal Feed forward and Feedback*

A strong emphasis of the subject is giving quality feedback. The focus is on promptly and clearly showing (i) what the students have done well, (ii) where their effort could be improved, and (iii) how they could improve their effort.

Trying to learn the names of students facilitates the provision of engaging feedback, indeed the practice is germane to pluralism more widely (Obeng-Odoom, 2017). So, I put significant effort in trying to remember student names and trying to address students by name throughout the semester. Taking feedback from the students is a related process. Such feedback takes various forms. I would usually receive formal feedback from surveys of students' opinions, while informal feedback is in the form of conversations that takes place before and after class. Also, students are given the opportunity to provide feedback to their peers, for example, as judges in debates, a teaching practice which facilitates dialogue, and helps students to learn how to give, and to take, feedback and offer feed forward to peers, with the teacher as a moderator. So, the debate itself is judged by other students, but teacher feedback is also provided. Some feedback is given confidentially and others publicly, especially if it is to be appreciated by the entire class. A key emphasis in this feedback is that good debaters must know the argument of opponents thoroughly in order to appraise and counter them. The take-away point from the debate is to emphasise that economic principles and theories are subject for contest not mere technical propositions and that economists must dialogue regardless of their preferred arguments.

There are also practical advantages from feed forward surveys conducted by the university which, while not specific to urban economics, feeds into its pluralist character. For example, in feed-forward conversations, students emphasised the need to use online class registers instead of laboriously taking the role by calling out the names of about one hundred students. This threat was quickly addressed by adopting the online register system. Second, some students highlighted the need to give a brief overview of the class about a day prior to the class. Again, this feed-forward was taken into account by sending class announcements that contextualised the impending topic, while linking it to contemporary issues (e.g., trade wars between China and USA). Then, there was the feed-forward about the need for a bit more time to discuss the content of the subject which was impossible with a large class size. In responding to this feed-forward, students were offered to either stay behind after class, form smaller groups, or use existing debating groups as study groups which could invite the subject lecturer to partake in out-of-class study meetings. However, as many students work at different times, individual students were encouraged to make personal appointments with the subject teacher either after class or before class. Some students took advantage of this arrangement and met the subject teacher at mutually convenient times. Students who needed some feed forward on their assessments were encouraged to show their work for formative advice and, when assignments were finally submitted, detailed feedback was given. Such intersectional sets of feedback are aimed at emphasising the spirit of pedagogical pluralism in urban economics.

This spirit characterises the content, teaching, assessments, and, as just demonstrated, the centrality of feedback/forward to the subject. From the perspective of constructive alignment (Obeng-Odoom, 2016; Obeng-Odoom, 2017), the benefits of these mutually re-enforcing features are self-evident. However, what students think of them, which aspects of the subject they prefer and why, and what challenges they face are empirical questions. So, it is crucial to systematically analyse student experiences.

3. Student experiences

Students highlighted three challenges of the subject, directly related to pedagogical pluralism. The first is the significant amount of intellectual work required, a problem compounded by the limited time they had as working students. A second issue relates to large class sizes and their corrosive effects on interactive education. The third, more fundamental problem was catering to the needs of students who self-selected to study *only* mainstream economics.

How to contextualise these three problems within the wider web of student experiences requires additional analysis. The intellectually demanding nature of pedagogical pluralism is well-known (Denis, 2009; Stilwell, 2011; Argyrous and Thornton, 2014; Thornton, 2015, 2017; Obeng-Odoom, 2017). In Urban Economics, this challenge was expressed in the following ways: ‘Homework tasks often involved reading 20 page plus articles’, ‘A lot of reading ... that may have overwhelmed myself with information’, ‘the readings were long and difficult to comprehend’, ‘Having weekly homework was a pain trying to balance a social life and 20–30 h of work a week’, and ‘This subject has been very challenging for me but also very interesting... concepts ... are difficult’ (University-run SFS/UTS, 2018). For some students, ‘There are multiple resources available to the course, however, the readings he provided were inconclusive. Too many conflicting views and not enough facts’ (University-run SFS/UTS, 2014). Others noted that ‘It’s ridiculous that he expects us to read everything and understand the motions of what is being said when more than half the time is conflicting views’ (SFS/UTS, 2014); that ‘I think the readings could be made easier... if we could be given readings on the topics with the same messages but that were more understandable I think that would help us’ (University-run SFS/UTS, 2015); or that ‘lecture slides with details rather than ambiguous readings’ is preferred (University-run SFS/UTS, 2016).

The space, class size, and lesson duration for pluralist education provided another barrier to pedagogical pluralism. As one student put it ‘This particular class size does not work with the specific assessment type. Class participation is extremely hard for students in a class of this size’, with another noting that ‘it is difficult to gain specific help on smaller aspects of the subject in such a large class without hindering the flow of the class and wasting the other ... peoples time as well’. Another student noted that ‘the size of the lecture room did not promote engagement. I recommend smaller multiple classrooms of less time length, rather than one big classroom which goes for 3 h’. For one student, ‘This subject is very interesting however ... The class size is too big to gain a deep understanding and a 3-hour lecture as the only form of contact is too long for the in-depth study’. In sum, as one student put it, ‘to run a tutorial in a room with 100+ people is an extremely ineffective and poor way for any student to learn. If you think that a tutorial is necessary for this subject (which I think it is), then run actual smaller tutorials outside of lecture times rather than forcing students to contribute in a large classroom whereby they may not be comfortable and where we struggle to hear other classmates’ input in a large lecture theatre as this is an extremely ineffective way of learning’ (University-run SFS/UTS, 2018).

A few students were also concerned that, having self-selected to study ‘pure economics’ for their career or personal advantage in the property industry, the subject was rather more like ‘urban social studies’. According to one student, ‘I understand the course is designed to cover many aspects of Property Economics, but I do not feel that the study of ancient economic theories and papers will ever be relevant to me in my future career’. Another was of the view that the subject was ‘Too socialist for my liking, found it hard to relate to property but rather more a social study of urban areas’. For a third student, ‘I expected this subject to explore the functions and operations of property markets - hence the name ‘Urban Economics’. However, I remain disappointed that the subject has focused in the vast majority on social studies rather than the studies of economics’. Another student stressed that ‘I don’t really put any interest in any social justice activity and have never intended to do so. So, learning this subject or not has no contributions in my social justice perspective’. For one student, the wider political economic concerns of the subject were ‘Not really a concern of mine at all’.

These problems are formidable. Yet, overall, student experiences appear to be positive. At a minimum, the evidence in Table 1 suggests that neither standards, nor satisfaction levels, have lowered since the introduction of pluralist urban economics.

The six-year student assessment survey, presented in Table 1, shows that urban economics is rated as a ‘good’ subject whether taught as a mainstream (2012–2013) or as a pluralist study unit (2014–2018)–. Out of a maximum of 5 points, the average overall

Table 1
Teaching Evaluation of Pluralist Urban Economics.2012–2018.
Source: SFS various years.

Urban Economics	Overall Assessment of Teacher	Overall Assessment of Subject	Overall Assessment of Feedback	Enrolled	Responding	Response Rate
Mainstream Urban Economics, 2012-2013						
2012	3.39	3.43	3.13	57	46	81
2013	3.64*	3.40	3.53	62	20	32
Average	3.52	3.42	3.33	59.5	33	56.5
Pluralist Urban Economics, 2014-2018						
2014	3.58	3.00	3.58	56	13	39%
2015	3.97	3.61	4.16	85	33	23%
2016	4.04	3.54	4.29	93	58	62%
2017	3.07	2.70	3.50	116	46	40%
2018	3.74	3.29	3.74	128	89	70%
Average	3.68	3.23	3.85	95.60	47.80	46.80%

* The subject was taught by two mainstream economists. One received an overall rating of 3.78, while the other received a rating of 3.50. The average rating was 3.64.

assessment of the mainstream module was 3.42, which was slightly higher than 3.23, the average figure for overall assessment of pluralist urban economics. In contrast, pluralist urban economics performs slightly better in terms of overall average teacher rating (3.68 compared to mainstream urban economics overall average rating of 3.52). Similarly, pluralist urban economics receives slightly better overall average rating for quality feedback (3.85 compared to the mainstream urban economics equivalent of 3.33). So, overall, on the criteria of teacher effort, subject quality, and constructive feedback, the two approaches to teaching urban economics are quite similarly assessed. The pass rate, another criterion for assessing quality in undergraduate education, has also been similar for both mainstream and pluralist urban economics. Thus, overall, the evidence seems to confirm earlier research (e.g., Denis, 2009; Dow, 2019) that pluralism does not lead to lowering standards or reducing levels of satisfaction.

Indeed, when student feedback is more systematically collected and analysed, the evidence suggests that pedagogical pluralism could even raise standards or satisfaction levels. Consider the evidence from one student-administered, in-class survey, which was more closely targeted at students who regularly attended classes. Out of 56 respondents who took the survey in 2016, 8 (14%) rated the class '5', 31 (55%) rated the class '4', 15 (29%) rated the class '3', while 2 (4%) rated the class '2'. No student rated the class a '1'. This distribution gives a mean value of 3.8 in 2016, much higher than 3.54, which was the assessment of the general population of students. Likewise, in 2017, a similarly more targeted approach was used. Almost half (48 per cent) of the students responding to the survey considered the class to be very good (4 rating) or excellent (5 rating), while about one fifth (19 per cent) considered the class poor (2 rating) or very poor (1 rating). The rest of the class (33 per cent) thought the class was good. The mean was 3.4 out of 5, again, much higher than the 2.7 mean based on the responses from the generalised survey population. In 2018, a more quantitatively representative sample (74 per cent cf. to 70 per cent in the SFS in Table 1) was taken. It was a useful sample because it was also more qualitatively representative, as it more narrowly targeted students who regularly attended classes. In turn, it likely benefited from a fuller appreciation of the subject. The results show that 54 per cent judged pluralist urban economics to be very good or excellent (see breakdown in Appendix A), that is, most students rated the subject as very good (4) or excellent (5). Because such more targeted surveys provide more reliable evidence (see Nowell et al., 2014), these latter results need to be taken particularly seriously.

The most recent data from more targeted surveys (see breakdown in Appendix A) show that most students (80 per cent) prefer more interactive and engaging teaching methods (tutorials and debates) to the functionalist lecture approach commonly used in urban economics. More than 75 per cent of the students strongly acknowledge that the subject encourages critical reflections on mainstream economics, while emphasising the centrality of critical thinking. Sixty per cent of the students developed either very strong, or excellent, awareness about social justice. Nearly half of the students (47.31 per cent) developed very strong, or excellent, personal commitment to social justice, while more than half of the students (51.11 per cent) developed either very strong, or excellent, appreciation of the environmental limits to growth.

For most of the students, pluralist features have been transformational. According to one of them, 'The feedback was written in a manner that brought understanding to your strengths but also highlighted weaknesses and included how to improve'. For another, 'This is a refreshing alternative to ... minimal feedback that leaves little understanding of how to improve' (SFS 2018). Table 2 highlights the particular appreciation of social justice emphasis in the subject.

As Table 2 shows, some students have begun to appreciate both the nature of the problem, often shaped by structural economic forces, and the limitations of existing approaches for redressing them. The last statement, regarding the inherent contradictions and shocking levels of problems in capitalist urban development, also signals interest in probing fundamental alternatives.

In the last class, students had to debate the motion: 'socialist cities or barbarism'. On the one hand, the proponents presented a well-reasoned, well-researched, and well-argued case using Scandinavian or Nordic 'socialism' as its definition of 'socialism'. Although they would probably be better described as social democratic cities, the students sought to show what socialism could look like. Drawing inspiration from Rosa Luxemburg, socialist urban planning practices, and engagement with research on socialist cities, the proponents argued perceptively that individualism does not end with socialism. Indeed, under a socialist urban planning system, workers are rewarded for their effort; rentiers are penalised, so it is a more just system.

The opposition, on the other hand, showed class and promise as future economists. Basing their challenge on a familiar mainstream economics logic: critique socialism and prove that capitalism is better. They sought to challenge the definition of socialism by strategically arguing that Mao's China and Castro's Cuba are better examples of socialism. Their reference to corruption, the trade-off between good society and efficiency, and the emphasis on how the lack of private property would be a disincentive for investors would receive the nod of neoclassical and new institutional economists. Indeed, looking at the evidence of increasing inequality in the

Table 2

Students' critical appreciation of social justice emphasis in urban economics, 2018.

Source: Student-administered questionnaire, 2018.

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- 'I was naive but this subject has opened my perspective to the global issues'
 - 'Able to think more open and analytically about society'
 - 'I have become more aware of social issues in cities, especially environmental'
 - 'Completing this subject made me realise that there are injustices in all countries, but just different types. For example, in third world countries, there is social injustice in regards to women, adequate housing, education etc. These apply in Australia too, but in a different context'.
 - 'The information I have learned from this subject has made me re-evaluate my values in regards to social justice'
 - 'I did not understand the economic background to social justice issues. This subject brought this idea to me. For example, rental discrimination'.
 - 'I have a much deeper understanding of urban economics and how they are formed and the injustices that come from these forces. I am also more concerned about capitalism and the effect that this has on our economy and our environment. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss...now that I understand these things better it has actively devastated me in a way that I didn't expect. This world is a scary place'.
-

Nordic society now (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018), they might even convince some progressive economists. However, their claim that capitalist urban development would lead to more harmony in the long-run and the argument that urban economic growth is slower in socialist economies, are, using their own example, China, contestable.

The unanimous verdict of the panel of student judges was that the proponents won the debate. The reasoning behind the independent judgements of the student judges was fascinating. They emphasised critical thinking, evidence, engagement, rebuttals, and real-world examples. To quote one of the judges: 'In conclusion, the affirmative team won the debate, their depth in knowledge and ability to counter all arguments was the main drawing factor. Their adaptiveness and main arguments were more relevant rather than the narrow-minded approach made by the negative team'.

The other judges made similar observations. Indeed, in appraising the qualities of the affirmative case, another judge highlighted that, 'although the I thought the negative gave great case studies and examples, I thought they could work on their rebuttals a little more'. A third judge noted that the negative team had solid points, 'however, due to their minimal rebuttal...presentation was less engaging'. The judge concluded that 'I voted for the affirmative team to win. Both teams did a great job, however, I thought that the affirmative team had more well-rounded arguments and presented with more confidence and overall engagement'. For a fourth judge, 'The affirmative team provided sufficient examples of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark with clear taxation statistics and reasons why social cities prevail. They also provided contradicting example, with USA, where high student loans are apparent. This was effective in showing the negatives of a capitalist society. Rebuttals were addressed in depth and well delivered. However, the negative team provided vague arguments such as socialism takes away from human contribution in society and how it is unrewarding and demotivating. However, the affirmative was able to support their arguments with sufficient empirical evidence such as the Norway, Sweden, and Denmark examples which made their arguments more effective. The negative's lack of statistics made their arguments poor and not reliable to an audience. Decision: Affirmative wins this debate'.

These judgements strongly affirm the importance of the qualities in pluralist urban economics. They also signal the interest of students in an alternative urban economics education. If so, the case for reconstructing urban economics (Obeng-Odoom, 2016) must be revisited.

4. Reconstructing urban economics

One way of reflecting on the lessons of this case study is to return to the question, what is to be gained from reconstructing urban economics? The approach used to answer this question has entailed drawing on metrics that are inherently problematic. Some of them do not directly answer the questions about pedagogical pluralism at all. Such is the case of generic university-administered questions. However, as the paper has shown, even that evidence is quite helpful in showing that, in the register of the university, at least, pedagogical pluralism could achieve similar levels of student satisfaction as mainstream urban economics (see Table 1). Complemented with additional evidence, collected through asking questions directly related to pedagogical pluralism (Schneider, 2013), and appraising this evidence within a wider framework of pluralism, the evidence considered in this paper further clarifies what could be gained from pedagogical pluralism in urban economics. The evidence strongly suggests that pluralist urban economics offers students more than the servings on the menu list of mainstream urban economics. Reconstructing urban economics could help students to see how political economic analysis can address *their* concerns, *their* curiosities, and *their* understanding of cities. Society could also benefit from students who are increasingly aware of, and personally commit to, social justice. Clearly, then, teaching urban economics as a pluralist subject has demonstrated benefits.

Of course, pedagogical Pluralism in urban economics is inherently complex, creating much frustration for undergraduate students, especially on reconciling conflicting views. However, sustained dialogue before, during, and after face-to-face classroom interactions could facilitate the process and make it enjoyable, especially if learning is done in smaller groups and in more conducive physical space.

The large lecture theatre has its place, of course, but it could be complemented with smaller tutorial rooms. It is controversial whether students 'self-select' any particular school of thought. The literature on the sociology of choice (Gronow, 1997) casts doubts on the idea of the rational individual who makes utility-maximising decisions. Elsewhere (Obeng-Odoom, 2017), research on similar cohorts of students suggests that they are substantially indoctrinated even at pre-course information events when some subject teachers present, and ultimately teach, a one-sided property economics grounded in the Lockean idea of property-for-profit.

At a much wider society-level, there are several institutions in Australia, the Asia-Pacific region more generally, and the world system that encourage such strong focus on property-for-profit, what Anne Haila, the leading Finnish urban economist, has called 'institutionalising the property mind' (Haila, 2017). In turn, by the time students enrol for urban economics in the second and third years, a certain *choice* for mainstream urban economics has been socially produced. If so, the response to this problem is for teachers of pedagogical pluralism to seek out opportunities to provide more balanced, pluralist views and, hence, counter insidious processes of professionalisation.

Still, a much larger limitation to pedagogical pluralism is the declining amount of time that students have in modern society. The increase in the work day, coupled with shortening of the study day, has arisen from the cumulative effects of increasing cost of university education, the declining financial support by universities and the state and, hence, the growing pressure on students to have to work to support themselves in Australia (see, for a discussion, Stokes and Wright, 2010; Obeng-Odoom, 2012; Ramia et al., 2013). This panoply of issues is a major threat to quality (urban) economics education because it reduces the space for dialogue and, instead, creates grounds for resentment against dialogue. This dialectic could, itself, be a focus of urban economics education in a way that could further increase – in Paolo Freire's (1970) terminology – the conscientisation of the students.

It follows that pedagogical pluralism in urban economics cannot merely end in the classroom: it must feed into, engage, and

support, the broader struggle of empowering economics education.

5. Conclusion

Pedagogical pluralism in urban economics is a rarity. The disinterest in developing urban economics this way is often justified by reference to the controversy about whether such a pedagogy is scientific and, if it is, at what stage such pluralism can be introduced, in what ways it could be taught, and by what teaching methods.

For mainstream economists who accept pluralism to be scientific, their preference is for pluralism to be introduced as advanced courses, as pluralism in earlier, undergraduate education could confuse students. Political economists tend to question this deferral of pedagogical pluralism, preferring, instead, to have pluralism woven into the entire fabric of economics education.

The empirical task of this paper was to ascertain these claims. Examining one case of pluralist economics education through analysing its subject content, teaching approach, assessment, and feedback styles, as well as examining how students have experienced pluralism of the subject helps to put the controversy in perspective.

While recurrently highlighting how intellectually exacting it could be to study pluralist urban economics, students also suggest that pedagogical pluralism in second/third-year urban economics education could substantially enhance the quality of their learning in terms of developing their critical thinking, increasing their awareness of, and personal commitment to social justice. Problems in the learning process could be mitigated by keeping class sizes reasonably small and holding class meetings in rooms that foster such interactive approach to studying (urban) economics. So, if supported, under the conditions described in the case study, pedagogical pluralism in urban economics could contribute to nurturing a new cadre of urban economists whose repertoire of concerns includes citizenship in urban life.

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Appendix A

Student assessment of the contributions of specific pluralist characteristics, 2018.

Source: Student-administered questionnaire, 2018.

Likert Scale*	1	2	3	4	5	Total Number of Students Answering**
<i>Questions</i>						
Preference for Pluralist teaching methods over the lecture format	18		28		42	88
%	20.45		31.82		47.73	
Teacher Encouragement of Critical Reflections on Mainstream Urban Economics	0	7	15	28	42	92
%	0.00	7.61	16.30	30.43	45.65	
The Centrality of Critical Thinking to the Subject		5	17	35	33	90
%	0.00	5.56	18.89	38.89	36.67	
Developed More Awareness of Social Justice	2	18	18	35	22	95
%	2.11	18.95	18.95	36.84	23.16	
Developed Personal Commitment to Social Justice	10	17	22	29	15	93
%	10.75	18.28	23.66	31.18	16.13	
Better Appreciation of the environmental limits to growth	2	12	30	37	9	90
%	2.22	13.33	33.33	41.11	10	
Overall assessment of the subject	15		29	51		95
%	15.79		30.53	53.68		

*5: Excellent 4: Very Good 3: Good 2: Average 1: Poor.

**The total number of students who completed the survey was 95, but not all students answered all questions. So, the total number of students answering specific questions vary.

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