



# Mind over the matter

Teachers of pluralist economics need to foster argument that is sound, not shrill. **Amy S. Cramer** makes a point.

**I**t's the first day of the semester at Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona and I am standing in front of my new crop of students. It's a diverse lot: they range in age from teenagers to senior citizens; two are recent immigrants and four young adults in the corner are on the track team. "Welcome to Voices On The Economy — the VOTE programme," I tell them. "This class

will help you find your voice on economic issues. And by that, I mean discover what you think is the best solution to create the material well-being we all want and need."

A middle-aged man in the third row calls out: "Do I get an A if I already know what I think?" Emboldened by the laughter of his classmates, he continues, "We just get rid of this administration with their terrible conservative policies and presto! All our problems will be solved." One of the track team members says, "Are you kidding? Conservatives are saving this country. We need to reverse those terrible liberal policies we got under the last administration." A young woman with a

blue streak in her hair says, “We’ve had centuries of conservative and liberal policies in this country, and people are still hungry and homeless. Capitalism is the problem. We need democratic socialism.”

Experience tells me not to open up the class to students to share their personal thoughts and beliefs. It tends to turn into a free-for-all where they try to convince one another without actually listening. Students have to understand the different economic perspectives before they engage in an intelligent debate, so I cut in. “I love your passion. I am glad many of you already know how important these issues are. Your life is, and always has been, and always will be impacted by economic issues. But the VOTE programme isn’t a free-for-all. Our mission is to inspire you to find new solutions to our economic problems. And we’re going to do that in the next 16 weeks together, by creating a culture of respectful listening, passionate advocacy, and intelligent debate.”

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I notice that the recent immigrant from Vietnam, an older woman, looks worried. I say, “Those of you who aren’t sure what we’re talking about, please don’t worry. This programme is meant for everyone, whether you have a PhD or have never given much thought to these issues. We’re going to talk about healthcare, the environment, international trade, market power, and eight other urgent economic issues. Then we’re going to line up the radical, conservative, and liberal

perspectives on these issues in a completely unbiased way. Then you’ll have the background and understanding to form your opinions.”

“You mean I’m going to become a radical?” the man in the third row jokes.

“And I’ll go to the dark side and become a liberal?” the blue-haired woman says.

“I’m definitely sticking with conservative,” says the track runner confidently.

I just smile. “Please know that the VOTE Program is not going to sell you any perspective. We’re going to start by learning the ideas of great economic thinkers of the past—Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and John Maynard Keynes. You will learn how their ideas are echoed in today’s conservative, radical, and liberal perspectives. The point is to help you become educated voters at the ballot box and at the dinner table, and to use those transformative ideas as a springboard to find new solutions to economic problems.”

How did I come to be standing in front of this diverse group? In the 1980s, when I was working on my doctorate in economics, I was troubled by the aversion to pluralism expressed by many of my colleagues. Often, economists view those who think differently as the enemy and that attitude is reflected in society. Conservatives, liberals, and radicals vilify and reject one another’s ideas. But I believe these ideas could spark brilliant solutions, if only we could hear one another with an open mind. We haven’t had a great economic thinker in a century. I believe each one of us has the potential to be the next one.

Many teachers would like to take a pluralistic approach, but the pushback is often intense. In 2010, social studies teachers in the state of Texas were required by law to teach students that unregulated capitalism is superior to all other economic

systems, and to present conservative economic policies most favorably. A one-sided approach is found in majority of economics textbooks and courses at every level of education in the US. And many students and educators, here and around the world, are demanding to be taught diverse points of view.

I believe the stakes couldn't be higher, because if we don't find alternatives to siloed thinking and scornful debates, the well-being of everyone on the planet is at risk. In 2013, I founded VOTE, a not-for-profit organisation, to teach economic issues from the liberal, radical, and conservative economic perspectives in a balanced and unbiased way. The training, which is offered for free, is highly formatted and its curriculum teaches participants to engage in civil discourse while educating them in basic economic literacy.

The curriculum demystifies jargon and makes connections between theory and policy. For example, I use the story of the origins and development of the game Monopoly to open up the conversation about lack of affordable housing. Then I put on three "masks" and address the problem as a radical, liberal, and conservative economist. I revisit the Monopoly story from each perspective and offer three divergent theoretical analyses of the policy of rent control.

Starting with a story, or newspaper article, or song lyrics, or political cartoon gives students a common framework and allows us to draw bright lines between the perspectives. Newbies to economics or pluralistic thinking need these distinctions at first. After learning the background and the three voices, students practice voicing talking points that justify each perspective.

This can be a challenge when they must make a statement about which they vehemently disagree. For example, a person assigned the liberal perspective might say, "We're fortunate to have a

government that does the right thing by partnering with private industry to create more affordable public and private housing options." The person assigned the conservative view might say, "Freely determined price signals mean that communities are robust and people have affordable places to live." While the person assigned the radical approach might say: "When housing is an investment in people and not an investment for profit there is plenty of money in our communities to afford decent and sustainable housing."

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We then apply the talking points to group activities. For example, we role play "Breakfast with the Family," where groups of three improvise a conversation as family members with different perspectives on an issue. Another classroom activity is making posters. Groups are assigned to illustrate each of the three perspective and make it vividly clear why their perspective is the best, and why the others are problematic. When people act out scenarios from different perspectives, we reach the golden moment where they realise all perspectives want the same things; just the ways to get there are different.

One of my students was studying theatre and had an ambition to perform on Broadway. When his group got up to perform their skit on income distribution from the radical perspective, we were amazed by his acting skills. After the class, he told me: "I come from a family of academics and I've always been left out of

conversations because I never understood the debates. I just voted the way my family voted. Now, I understand the issues and I have my own opinions. I could learn this because your class uses the arts to teach economics.”

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Art opens us up to our emotions. Far from being a dry topic, economics is deeply emotional. I want students to care about and understand how each issue is personally relevant to their lives. Effective economics education — and any education, really — has to connect on that emotional level.

I like to compare VOTE to a Sputnik moment. People had been looking up at the

sky for millennia, but the launch of the first satellite sparked the human imagination in a way that a whole generation fell in love with the idea of space exploration. VOTE pushes people to want to solve the problems economists have been mulling over for hundreds of years: how do we create a community where people have what they need to flourish? How do we create a world where we are released from worry about our physical well-being and free to make our unique, positive contributions to society?

With our world divided by rancor and mistrust, civil discourse is more important than ever. In a healthy democracy, diverse opinions are a gift. I believe there are no limits to the possibilities of what we can accomplish through our economic relationships when we harness the intelligence and imagination of people from all walks of life.

■ [Amy S. Cramer, PhD, is co-author with journalist Laura Markowitz of \*Voices On The Economy, Volume I: How Open-Minded Exploration of Rival Perspectives Can Spark Solutions to Our Urgent Economic Problems\*](#)