

The Dissident Ambassador

In a new paper, Greg Mankiw shares some thoughtful reflections on teaching and heterodoxy:

I have always thought that instructors, especially in introductory courses, are like ambassadors for the economics profession. The role of ambassadors is not to represent their own views but to act as agents for their principal. Just as ambassadors are supposed to faithfully represent the perspective of their nations, the instructor in an introductory course (and intermediate courses as well) should faithfully represent the views shared by the majority of professional economists.

[...]

This perspective of instructor as ambassador raises the question of what instructors should do if they hold views far from the mainstream of the economics profession. If you are an Austrian or Marxist economist, for example, what should you do if asked to teach an introductory course? In my view, there are only two responsible courses of action. One is to sublimate your own views and spend most of the course teaching what the mainstream believes, even if you disagree with it. Because many introductory students will take only one or two courses in economics throughout their educations, it would be pedagogical malpractice, in my judgment, to focus on an idiosyncratic minority viewpoint. The other responsible course of action is to avoid teaching introductory (and even intermediate) courses entirely. In a more advanced elective, there is nothing wrong with teaching an idiosyncratic minority viewpoint, as long as students know what they are getting.

Mankiw's view definitely resonates with me, but my position – and my practice – is rather

different. I say that a professor's fundamental fiduciary duty is *to teach their students about the world – not what his peers think about the world*. As long as your discipline is fundamentally sound, fortunately, these two goals closely overlap. If your discipline is a corrupt pseudo-science, however, your obligations to your students *require* you to teach heterodoxy. Sure, you'll have to explain the normal view in the process of debunking it. Yet it's a dereliction of duty to teach nonsense as fact.

Analogously, by the way, it's fine to act as a loyal ambassador for a fundamentally virtuous organization. But if you're the ambassador for North Korea, you have not only the right but the obligation to be a traitor. "I'm just promoting my client's interests" is as flimsy a defense as "I'm just following orders." See Mike Huemer on legal ethics for further discussion.

Since I am a professional economist, I'm happy to say that I don't consider my discipline a corrupt pseudo-science. However, economics is also *far* from "fundamentally sound." When I teach, then, I try to split the difference. I spend about half of the time as Mankiw recommends: neutrally describing the economic consensus. When the consensus is far from the truth, though, I go out of my way to amend it.

Yes, I try to plainly disclose whether I'm describing the research consensus or just telling them what's actually reasonable to believe. And no, I don't penalize students for arguing that the consensus is right and Caplan is wrong. Some of my exams even *require* students to disagree with me! Still, my primary goal is to teach students how the economy works, not what most economists happen to believe.

Furthermore, the only economics students who really *need* to understand the current conventional wisdom of economics are... graduate students! After all, no matter how misguided the research consensus happens to be, you can't be a successful researcher unless you understand it. Most Econ 1 students, in stark contrast, will never take another economics class. So the sole economics instructor they're ever going to have should rigidly focus on economic reality. Thus, I essentially reverse Mankiw's advice to confine "idiosyncratic minority viewpoints" to advanced students. No matter what you think about Keynesianism, you have a fiduciary responsibility to teach your grad students all about it. Otherwise, they'll be at a severe professional handicap. For undergrads, in contrast, the truth of Keynesianism is pivotal. If your students' lifetime commitment to economics comes to fifteen weeks, it would be silly to spend five weeks on an intellectual dead-end.

Am I saying that professors should teach whatever they feel is true? No; a thousand times no. If you use your "feelings" to form beliefs, you shouldn't be a professor at all. The first fiduciary duty of every intellectual is to set emotions aside, and calmly and patiently study a wide range of arguments and evidence. Once you've done that, however, you owe it to your students to share the fruits of your labors. And if, along the way, you discover that

your discipline is misguided, you should let your students know that, too.