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A lottery on the first day of classes! An innovative structured steps assignment on a partially randomly selected topic



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we present an innovative in-depth writing assignment with structured steps in an undergraduate economic development course, where we bring two developing countries, randomly selected and represented by two students in class to write about, and later discuss, a certain development problem existing in the two countries, and to prove which country was more successful in overcoming its problem. The assignment started with its most exciting part – the lottery – which was used to assign countries for the students. The guideline, which comprised a detailed outline, important websites and how to use them, and a detailed rubric, provided students with the necessary answers to their inquiries. The feedback on the first part of the projects indicated not only the depth and width required but the degree of accuracy as well. The results were magnificent compared to traditional projects where students were only required to write on a topic of their choice with no accompanying clarifying material on the amount of depth and width required and with no feedback.

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1. Introduction

Teaching an undergraduate course in economic development to non-native speakers of English is confronted by many challenges. First, there is the challenge of boredom. Economic development is primarily a theoretical course which represents a shock – and sometimes a betrayal – to many students who joined the economics department believing that they will deal with numbers and only numbers, rather than long descriptive, argumentative or analytical essay questions which demand intensive concentration on minor details and long hours of studying. Second, there is the challenge of language. In spite of the fact that students joining the department, or more precisely expressed the university we taught in, studied English as their second language, economics as we have always believed is a language in itself, the more it approaches the international language of mathematics the easier this language becomes, while the more it approaches theoretical issues as in the case of economic development, the more difficult the language turns out to be. Third, there is the challenge of making students write original term papers where they arrive at original conclusions. Forth, there is the challenge of making students write in-depth papers and oppose their tendency to write superficial ones under the familiar excuse that they did not know exactly how deep the research should go in tackling the research problem. Fifth, there is the challenge of enabling students' to think critically through reaching original results not arrived at before and interpreting results which can allow several viewpoints. Sixth, there is the challenge of submitting papers which are meticulously edited and intensively revised by showing students that not even the smallest error will be overlooked. Seventh, there is the challenge of guaranteeing

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justice in allocating developing countries among students as topics for their researches, some of which are data- and information- abundant, while others are not.

The seven challenges forced us into gradually developing an assignment specifically for this economics development course, an assignment which incorporates a detailed guideline clarifying the major and minor steps to be taken to reach the required target, but which most importantly incorporates a lottery on the first day of classes! In this paper we present this innovative in-depth writing assignment with structured steps, which involves bringing two developing countries, randomly selected and represented by two students in class, to write about, and later discuss, a certain development problem existing in the two countries, and to prove which country was more successful in overcoming its problem. The projects are submitted in two phases: a first phase, upon which students receive a detailed written feedback, and a final paper comprising their first edited phase and their newly submitted second phase and conclusion. All submissions had to pass through a plagiarism detection software. After reviewing briefly the literature on writing assignments in economics courses in section two, section three explains the project design and guidelines, section four elaborates on how the proposed assignment addressed the challenges faced by the instructors of this course, while sections six and seven bring about the results comparing the present assignment with conventional ones.

2. A quick review of the literature on writing assignments in economics

The benefits of using writing in general, and writing-across-curriculum (WAC) in particular, to enhance economics students' academic learning and skills are numerous and well established in the literature. Using writing assignments in addition to other assessment techniques in economics courses was found to enhance students learning as compared to courses which did not comprise writing assignments (see for example [Greenlaw, 2003](#)) as it helps students learn to think as economists ([Siegfried et al., 1991, p. 211](#)). According to [Cohen and Spencer \(1993\)](#), to reap the utmost out of the writing-to-learn approach, "instructors must devote energy not just to the students' finished papers but to the students' writing processes, the strategies and procedures followed in the act of writing. It is also important to devote more attention to assignment design . . . and to responding to student writing" (1993, p. 219). The WAC was suggested and supported by many economists including [Fulwiler \(1990\)](#), [Holder and Moss \(1987\)](#), [McLeod \(1987\)](#), [Meyers \(1986\)](#), and [Crowe and Youga \(1986\)](#). While our approach differs from the WAC approach in that it includes a midterm and a final exam in the course while the WAC does not, it definitely is different from both the WAC and the conventional term paper in, first, providing detailed structured steps on a partially randomly selected topic (random with respect to countries and non-random with respect to country problem and subtopics), second, in providing detailed feedback on the initial phase of the paper through a standardized feedback, thereby improving the students' writing skills, third, by designating the subtopics under each selected problem.

Besides the advantages of writing, evidence abounds on the benefits of using rubrics in economics ([Santos and Lavin, 2004](#); [Mora, 2010](#); [McGoldrick and Peterson, 2013](#)), as well as other disciplines (see for example [Freeman and Lewis, 1998](#); [Walvoord and Anderson, 1998](#); [Huba and Freed, 2000](#); [Morgan et al., 2004](#); [Stevens and Levi, 2012](#); [Suskie, 2009](#) among others). Furthermore, the importance of feedback is emphasized whether for improving the performance of economics students in general ([Walstad, 2001](#)) or for those whose English is their second language in particular ([Chandler, 2003](#)). The present assignment makes use of both techniques.

On the other hand, there is no evidence in the literature of economics assignments on the use of lottery. However there is ample evidence in the academic literature in general on the benefits of lottery such as achieving fairness, overcoming potential conflicts and avoiding certainty when certainty may lead to undesired outcomes. As indicated by [Broome \(1984\)](#) "Randomness appears to be a way of bringing some fairness to an inherently unfair situation." Put simply, "Goods that cannot be divided without great loss of value are often allocated by lottery which gives all applicants an equal chance of getting them" ([Elster, 1992, p. 72](#)). In this project, there is inherently an unfair situation in that some countries' data and information abound through primary and secondary sources, such as India, whereas for others, such as North Korea, data seldom exists in world bank statistics or otherwise. To guarantee justice countries are allocated through the lottery.

In addition to guaranteeing justice, [Elster](#) elaborates that "lotteries are attractive as a focal point solution if indeterminacy or conflict prevents the application of a substantive principal" (p. 72). As early application of this assignment found that conflicts existed between students on what they believe are the 'good' countries, the proposed random choice of countries overcame potential tensions.

A third advantage of a lottery is that lottery "may be useful to create uncertainty when certainty leads to corruption" ([Elster, 1992, p. 72](#)). In fact, sometimes giving the students the choice to choose countries provides them with an opportunity to make use of previous projects they did in other courses, while making some modifications on the original to avoid being detected by the plagiarism detection software. A lottery, on the other hand, can prevent this dishonesty.

3. Setting up the project guidelines

Economic development is a module which is concerned primarily with analyzing the economic problems that developing countries face, how to measure such problems, why they emerged and how to confront them (among other issues). As instructors we discuss such problems in class on a regional basis such as for Africa or Latin America as part of the

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