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Reinterpreting the economics textbook: A student assignment

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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on teaching methods for economics demonstrates different ways the instructor can present the material to the students. Here the author proposes an assessed learning process whereby the students take responsibility for teaching and learning aspects of the course themselves by interpreting the textbook and representing it in a more accessible way. The assignment incorporates aspects of problem based learning, peer-assisted learning and reciprocal teaching, with a relatively low administrative burden (which is often a deterrent in large classes). This article describes the assessment method and gives some practical information to facilitate adoption in other courses.

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1. Introduction

Teaching introductory economics to non-economics students is a component of teaching at most Economics Departments, and in many cases this introductory economics course is compulsory with the majority of students not continuing with economics in their degree programme (Siegfried, 2000a,b). Problems with these courses often include large classes with very diverse skills and interests, high failure and disengagement rates, and often little actual engagement with the subject material (Riemann, 2004; Caviglia-Harris, 2003). These issues can also arise even for students who intend to continue with economics where the focus in the introductory economics course can often be

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on theory and drawing graphs rather than allowing the students to immerse themselves in more relevant economic issues and policy (Salemi, 2005; Elchanan et al., 2001).

Given these acknowledged challenges there is a broad literature on novel methods instructors can use to increase student engagement in economics courses, either within the lecture setting or through assessment techniques. Lecture presentation methods studied include the use of video (Sexton, 2006; Leet and Houser, 2003), works of art (Watts and Christopher, 2012), music (Tinari and Khandke, 2000), literature (Cotti and Johnson, 2012), online resources (Gratton-Lavoie and Stanley, 2009), experiments (Walker, 1987; Balkenborg and Kaplan, 2010), and social media and blogs (Cameron, 2012) to list but a few.

Walstad (2006) discusses the importance of assessment selection in student learning in undergraduate economics modules. Multiple choice tests are a staple of assessment in large economics classes (Becker, 2000), and while cost effective to run, are not appropriate for assessing deep learning or the application of economics concepts and theories and do not allow students to gain insight into the working life of an economist. Beyond multiple choice assessment, Greenlaw (2003) presents a strong argument for increasing the 'active learning' component in Principles of Economics modules, specifically through an increase in student writing. This paper shows that students who were required to do a series of writing assignments showed greater learning than those in the control group. Similarly Dynan and Cate (2009) advocate an increase in the level of structured writing, particularly in the early stages of economics and business curricula. Examining the Harvard seminars on college teaching, Light (1992) illustrates that the assessment methods which benefit students the most include intermediate and detailed feedback, frequent points of assessment and time to improve work as part of the grading process. Also, reinforcement of learning from peers is found to be significant.

In this paper the author presents the students with a task which puts the responsibility of the teaching and learning of the introductory economics course in the hands of the students themselves rather than the instructor. It is a well known adage that one of the best ways to test your knowledge of something is to teach it to someone else and it is upon this principal that this project is based. Essentially, in this task, the instructor asks the students to explain the material in the textbook in a more approachable way and through a more original medium than is done in the textbook. The ultimate product which the students produce is formally assessed and the result obtained contributes to the students' overall grade for the course. As such the overall process is referred to as an 'assignment' or 'assessment' throughout this paper. However, it should be noted that in many respects, the task set for the students is more than just an 'assessment' or 'assignment', it is actually a learning process, through group-work, problem based learning, active student engagement etc. that, eventually, culminates with a task that is assessed. Thus, the real emphasis and contribution is on learning in a different and innovative way.

The assessment design and structure draws on concepts from Reciprocal Teaching, Peer Assisted Learning and Problem Based Learning, each of which is discussed in more detail in the following section. The paper then describes the assessment method in detail, how it is structured, implemented and graded and gives some practical information which will assist other instructors in recreating and adapting this approach for their courses.

2. Theoretical framework for the proposed assessment approach

The assessment method proposed draws on many of the key aspects of reciprocal teaching, peer assisted learning and problem based learning, each of which is discussed in turn here.

Reciprocal teaching is a teaching approach designed to improve reading comprehension, primarily through summarisation, question generation, clarification, and prediction, which are supported through dialogue between teacher and students (Rosenshine and Meister, 1994). The concept was first introduced in Palincsar and Brown (1984) and expanded on in Palincsar (1986) and Brown and Palincsar (1989).

In practice (as described by Palincsar and Brown (1984)), students would read a passage of expository material, paragraph by paragraph. During this reading they learn and practice four reading comprehension strategies: generating questions, summarising, attempting to clarify word meanings or confusing text, and predicting what might appear in the next paragraph. In the early stages of reciprocal teaching, the teacher assumes a large responsibility for instruction by explicitly explaining these strategies on a selection of text. After the teacher has prepared the students, the students practice the

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