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## An exploration of Robert Frank's 'The Economic Naturalist' in the classroom

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### ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates a pedagogical method pioneered by Robert Frank: 'The Economic Naturalist Writing Assignment', in which students pose an interesting question based on an event they have personally observed, then use economic principles to solve the question in no more than 500 words—free of algebra, graphs and complex jargon. The paper concludes with a sample of questions (and answers) posed by students when I piloted this writing assignment. It is hoped that this paper will serve as a practical case study for aspiring lecturers who wish to create a more stimulating learning environment.

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### 1. Introduction

'Most students who take introductory economics seem to leave the course without really having learned even the most important basic economic principles', laments Robert Frank in 'The Economic Naturalist Writing Assignment', published in the *Journal of Economic Education* (Frank, 2006, p. 58). In fact, when students are given tests designed to assess their knowledge of basic economics six months after taking the course, they do not perform significantly better than others who never took an introductory course (Hansen et al., 2002). Wherein lies the problem? How do lecturers overcome this?

This paper will demonstrate the importance of writing assignments in promoting greater economic literacy. It is well established in the academic literature that writing assignments improve student learning of economic principles (Greenlaw, 2003; Dynan and Cate, 2008). '...writing is a tool of discovery, a way of working through ideas that you don't fully understand. In other words, writing is a positive-sum game. When you write, you don't merely put down what you already know; rather you end up knowing more' (Greenlaw, 2003, p. 61). Regular, structured writing assignments are important in developing the skills needed for self-directed learning (Dynan et al., 2008).

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Robert Frank's 'The Economic Naturalist Writing Assignment' is a form of writing intervention, in which students are asked to pose an interesting question about some pattern of events or behavior they have personally observed (a real life event), then use basic economic principles to solve the question in no more than 500 words (Frank, 2006, 2007). In 2010, I piloted this assignment in my classroom, and this paper provides a sample of questions (and answers) posed by my students. This writing assignment has practical benefits for teaching economics through real world examples and/or to students who are non-specialists. Furthermore, giving students more responsibility for framing questions is a key attribute of thinking like an economist and developing higher order learning skills (complex application, analysis and synthesis) in line with Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). This is a pre-requisite for self-directed learning. Finally, this paper can serve as a practical case study for lecturers interested in creating a more stimulating, interactive classroom environment.

Introductory economics classes have limited impact on economic understanding (Rebeck and Walstad, 2002, 2008). One cause of this is that most courses try to cover too many concepts, with the result that not enough attention or time is devoted to mastering important threshold concepts (Frank, 2007). The idea that less is better in teaching economics is not new (Becker, 2004). Getting economists to agree on a list of threshold concepts which should be mandatory in an introductory course creates a new dilemma (Frank, 2007). The most important thing, according to Frank, is that lecturers begin with a well articulated short list of principles, and then illustrate and apply each principle in the context of simple examples drawn from familiar settings (Frank, 2006). These principles are revisited in different contexts later in the course. Students then practice the principle by using it to solve simple problems taken from their own observations, and ultimately, to pose original questions which are answered by the same basic principles (Frank, 2006).

## 2. The economic naturalist

Frank uses the economic naturalist writing assignment in his introductory economics courses. Students formulate their own question based on a real life observation and are encouraged to write free of algebra, graphs and complex terminology, in a manner understandable by a relative who has never studied economics—the so-called Grandma test (Frank, 2007; Bray and Leape, 2008; Cowen, 2008).

The term 'economic naturalist' comes from an analogy Frank makes with someone who has taken an introductory course in biology: what types of questions would they be able to answer afterwards? 'If you know a little evolutionary theory, you can see things you didn't notice before. The theory identifies texture and pattern in the world that is stimulating to recognise and think about' (Frank, 2007, pp. 7–8).

Individual students may prefer particular learning styles, such as visual, aural or conceptual. Frank adopts the 'narrative theory of learning', which claims that the human brain absorbs information in narrative (story telling) form easier than in abstract form (equations, graphs and theory). This can be traced to the evolution of our species as storytellers and the importance of narrative in a child's learning experience (Carter, 1993; Carter and Doyle, 1996; Doyle, 1997). His writing assignment, therefore, is a practical application of this approach. Students who come up with an interesting question are more likely to have fun and devote energy to the task, and talk to others about it, which reinforces the practical aspects of what they learned. The learning is now internalised and great stories are usually remembered forever (Frank, 2007).

An important issue for any academic contemplating the adoption of this assignment is: how should this task be designed? Frank drills students in the use of concepts in class, then poses additional questions that require further application in similar context (Frank, 2006, p. 61). Students are given instructions relating to word limit, style of writing and use of economic principles to describe a real life event (all of which are highlighted above). Otherwise, they are left to their own devices. Frank provides no additional guidance or support to his students with respect to the choice of topic, structure of the essay or the mechanics of writing. His learning environment is unstructured. This is self-directed learning in line with the higher-order learning skills as described in Bloom's taxonomy. Frank does concede '...some students appear to struggle in their attempts to formulate a suitable question for their first paper' (Frank, 2006, p. 65). This is hardly surprising given students' relative inexperience

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