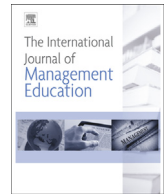


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## Research Notes

## Instruction of economics at higher education: A literature review of the unchanging method of “talk and chalk”



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this review was to examine what the existing literature says about the current teaching practices in economics, and what alternative ways might be available besides the predominant lecture method (“chalk and talk”). The findings of this review are, a) the lecture method continues being the preferred method of instruction in economics; b) a number of different teaching techniques have been tried, with mixed results; and c) a multiple-method teaching technique is recommended based on research findings.

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## 1. Introduction

Instruction of economics as a business foundational course has not been impressive. Recent research has found that the subject of economics and the quality of instruction has been consistently ranked among the lowest by undergraduate students in colleges and universities in the United States (Becker & Watts, 2001b; Cashin, 1990; Onger, 2009). Due to this poor ranking, there has been an increased effort to understand the reasons behind why students have such a negative perception of the subject of economics (Onger & Edward, 2006). Literature reviewed, reveal that several explanations have been explored. Among the main issues explored however, lecture (talk and chalk) method of instruction seems to be prominently addressed.

To date, the “chalk-and-talk” approach is predominantly used in teaching economics. For example, a 1996 (and repeated in 2000, 2005 and 2010) national survey of 628 economics instructors, found that instructors spent an average of 83% of their class time lecturing (Becker & Watts, 2001a). As in the liberal philosophy of education (Merriam & Simpson, 2000), where learners are assumed to come to class with little or no prior knowledge of the subject, and the instructor is for long seen as an expert equipped with textbook knowledge to deposit (bank) into students, learners' views are hardly considered in economics teaching, which gives a disturbing picture (Walstad & Watts, 1985). In response to this concern, there has been a growing body of research about finding ways to improve teaching in economics departments. As Becker & Watts argue, “changing teaching methods and increasing the importance of teaching within economics departments, in response to falling enrollments, is a plausible and endogenous response for faculty members and departments” (Becker & Watts, 2001a, p. 446). The purpose of this review therefore, is to explore what literature says about the teaching of economics. In the following sections of this paper, I will present, the method used in selecting literature, findings of the review, and a discussion.

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## 2. Selecting literature for review

To identify appropriate literature for review, there was an initial search of a variety of databases, including ERIC, Econlit, Proquest, and dissertation and abstracts databases, using a combination of three descriptors: “teaching economics, or learning in economics. Four criteria were then used in selecting relevant articles from a pool of studies. First, the articles had to be published no later than 1985, providing a definitive time frame of slightly over 30 years of review. Second, the studies reviewed had to have utilized data derived from teaching at a higher education level (post-high school). Third, the articles had to directly address teaching and/or learning in economics or a business related course. And fourth, the article had to have a definitive methodology and results/findings section. Using the above criteria, a total of 39 studies qualified for review.

Although the studies reviewed explored a wide range of issues that are related to the current concerns in the teaching of economics, four broad themes emerged. These themes are: the nature and characteristics of a typical introductory economics class, and identifying what is unique to an economics class (Becker & Watts, 2001a; 2001b; Boex, 2000; Allgood, Walstad, & Siegfrie, 2015; Guest & Duhs, 2002; Watts & Becker, 2008; Grimes, Millea, & Woodruff, 2004; Goffe, 2014); instructors' attributes as a factor in teaching economics (Becker & Watts, 2001a; Boex, 2000; Dynan & Rouse, 1997; Saunders, 2001; Velasco, Martinez, & Ferrero, 2012); the assessment, testing, and overall scholarship in the teaching of economics, dealing with who should determine the curriculum, what should be taught, and how should it be taught and assessed or tested (Alauddin & Butler, 2004; Anderson & Siegfried, 1997); and the current and potential teaching techniques in economics (Christoffersen, 2002; Hervani & Helms, 2004; Saunders & Christopher, 2003; Smith, 2002; Yamarik, S. 2007).

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. *Nature and characteristics of a typical economics class*

The first theme focuses on studies that identify the characteristic(s) that are unique to an introductory economics class. In other words, what is unique about teaching economics as opposed to other college level classes? Most of the characteristics identified pertain to subject content; student expected preparedness, and other teacher expectations (Johnston, James, Lye, & McDonald, 2000; Smith, 2002). Despite the institutional differences, the size of class, or even the instructor's teaching load, teaching in economics is usually structured around formal mathematical and/or statistical models. Conceptually, introductory economics is perceived as boring by students, because they do not know the discourse of these mathematical models (Colander, 2000; Lay, 1993). This is further compounded by the fact that there is a perception that to learn economics successfully, students need to have the ability for both abstract thinking and application of learned materials. Students in economics are expected, and sometimes assumed, to be capable of expressing complex ideas logically and eloquently. However, the development of these skills is not easily learned, and students often feel intimidated when they are unable to meet this expectation. For example, Lay (1993), in a study to identify personal and institutional characteristics that significantly contributed to the use of mathematics in teaching principles of economics, found that some instructors use mathematics as a tool for eliminating potentially unsuccessful students from the major. Arguably, this may be the reason why, consequently, students end up viewing economics as a difficult course, which should be left to persons who are gifted in math. Caropreso and Haggerty (2000) states, “because economics is an abstract, theoretical field of study, beginning students especially find it difficult to learn the fundamental content” (p.1).

A closely related factor is that most introductory economics classes use a standard textbook as the main resource for students' learning. The over-reliance on standard texts effectively places a restriction on instructors who may want to be innovative by soliciting ideas from other sources of learning, like the Internet, magazines, and/or movies, but feel obliged to follow the textbook contents as if it were a curriculum for the course. Because of the course content and textbook constraint, most economics professors prefer to lecture, instead of using other, more stimulating, techniques that are available and often used in other social science classes (Becker & Watts 2001a, b; Smith, 2002).

### 3.2. *Instructor's attributes as a factor in teaching economics*

Several studies have explored attributes or qualities of an effective economics instructor (Dynan & Rouse, 1997; Finegan & Siegfried, 1998, 2000; Saunders, 2001). The typical image of a U.S. undergraduate economics teacher continues to be a male, Caucasian, Ph.D. degree-holder, who has not written or edited a book within the past five years, who lectures to a class of students as he writes text, equations, or graphs on the chalkboard, and who assigns students readings from a standard textbook (Becker & Watts, 2001a). A number of scholars (Boex, 2000; Finegan & Siegfried, 1998; Saunders, 2001) have researched different attributes of effective economics instructor separately, and arrived at varied conclusions. For example, data from student evaluation of instructors (SEI) at Georgia State University showed that the most important attribute of an effective instructor is organization and clarity of material (Boex, 2000).

It has also been shown that a positive relationship exists between course grade and pre-course students' attitudes toward economics and instructors of economics. Furthermore, the incidences of taking additional economic courses were positively and significantly associated with various measures of student attitudes toward the course and the instructor's grading expectation and the expected grade. Studies have also been done to evaluate instructors' from the students/instructor perceptions and subject contents perspective (Boex, 2000; Bosshardt & Watts, 2001; Johnston, McDonald, & Williams, 2001). In

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