

Incorporating EconTalk Podcasts into the Principles Classroom

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Abstract

This short educational note describes how to incorporate EconTalk podcasts into a principles course. A list of specific podcasts is included, along with the applicable chapters from *Economics: Private and Public Choice* by Gwartney, Stroup, Sobel, and Macpherson.

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I. Introduction

Becker and Watts (2001) find that economists heavily rely on the so-called “chalk-and-talk” approach to lecturing. Becker (2000) and others have advocated going beyond just lecturing to incorporate more experiments and other hands-on activities in the classroom in order to increase student engagement. This has led a large number of teacher-scholars to advocate for visual media such as movies (Mateer, 2004; Mateer and Stephenson, 2011), comic strips (Lawson, 2006), video clips (Diamond, 2009), and television shows (Hall, 2005; Holian, 2011) to be used in the classroom.

This literature argues that moving away from the pure lecture model of classroom instruction has benefits for the classroom environment and student learning. For recent PhDs interested in teaching at a liberal arts college, however, moving away from chalk and talk has the additional benefit of moving closer to the “guide on the side” teaching style, which tends to be the dominant teaching style on most liberal arts campuses. Liberal arts colleges value experimentation in the classroom and eschew dogmatism in pedagogy, so taking the opportunity to broaden one’s skill set by integrating more active learning into the classroom might benefit young economists desiring to work in that environment. In this short educational note I explain how I used the economics podcast

EconTalk to reinforce certain concepts in my principles of economics course and to broaden my teaching repertoire.

II. The Course

Entering my second year of teaching at a liberal arts college, I felt I had an opportunity to experiment given our relatively small principles classes of 30–35 students. In redesigning the course I wanted to provide more opportunities to talk about issues of political economy because only approximately 20 percent of our principles students go on to major in economics, whereas all of our students will be practicing political economists as current and future citizens (Klein, 1999). During the process of deciding which elements to incorporate into the course, several graduating seniors mentioned to me how much they learned from EconTalk podcasts. EconTalk is an award-winning economics podcast hosted by economist Russ Roberts as part of the online Library of Economics and Liberty at Liberty Fund. While I too was a regular listener to EconTalk, I had never thought about including it in the class and was at a loss as to how to incorporate it into the course. All of the current economic literature that uses audio in the classroom, such as Hall and Lawson (2008), focuses on short songs, not hour-long podcasts.

My inspiration for the structure of the course came from George Mason professor Peter Boettke, who as the outside reader on my dissertation told me that the core idea of each of my papers should “fit on a 4x6 note card.” It seemed to me that having students summarize a podcast or reading on a note card would serve two purposes. First, it would force the students to think about what they were listening to in order to be able to properly summarize the material in 100 words or less. Second, reading the cards would give me a sense of how well the students understood the material they were being assigned outside of class. The cards could be used to lead student discussion toward concepts that students were struggling with as well as to provide guidance for individual student meetings.

The course was structured as a Monday, Wednesday, Friday course at 8:45 in the morning. Mondays and Wednesdays were devoted to lecturing on topics from the textbook (Gwartney et al., 2008). Before each lecture, however, the students were assigned either an EconTalk podcast to listen to or a reading assignment from a “pop” economics book such as *The Undercover Economist* (Hartford, 2007). After going through the EconTalk archives at

www.econtalk.org, I determined that there were six podcasts—all with Michael Munger of Duke as the guest—that enhance the typical economics lectures regarding opportunity costs, the theory of the firm, etc. Table 1 contains a listing of the chapters in Gwartney et al. (2008) associated with each podcast, the title of each podcast, and where in the archive to find each show.

Table 1: List of Chapters and Related Podcasts

Topic	Podcast Title/Location
Ch. 2: Some Tools of the Economist	“Ticket Scalping and Opportunity Cost” www.econtalk.org/archives/2006/04/ticket_scalping.html
Ch. 3: Supply, Demand and the Market Process	“Mike Munger on the Division of Labor” www.econtalk.org/archives/2007/04/mike_munger_on.html
Ch. 4: Supply and Demand: Applications and Extensions	“Munger on Price Gouging” www.econtalk.org/archives/2007/01/munger_on_price_1.html
Ch. 6: The Economics of Collective Decision-Making, lecture 1	“Giving Away Money: An Economist's Guide to Political Life” www.econtalk.org/archives/2006/06/giving_away_mon.html
Ch. 6: The Economics of Collective Decision-Making, lecture 2	“Private vs. Public Risk-Taking” www.econtalk.org/archives/2006/10/private_vs_publ_1.html
Ch. 21: Costs and the Supply of Goods	“Munger on the Nature of the Firm” www.econtalk.org/archives/2008/01/munger_on_the_n.html

Around these podcasts I assigned readings on other material covered in the class so that there was an assigned reading or podcast before every Monday and Wednesday lecture. Students were instructed to listen to the podcast or do the assigned reading and then summarize its contents using between 80 and 100 words on one side of a 4x6 note card. On the other side, they were told to briefly discuss something they didn't understand, something they disagreed with, or something they would like to discuss further. The note card for each podcast or reading was due at the beginning of the class just following its assignment. I did not do anything with the cards during the Monday and Wednesday lectures, however, instead waiting until after class on Wednesday to grade each note card and check for understanding.

As my goal with the note card assignment was primarily diagnostic, I did not rigorously grade each card. Instead, I read through each card, checking for effort and understanding. If the effort was there, even if they did not understand the material well, they received full credit (one percentage point), albeit often with a follow-up email from me stating that they should come see me during office hours. If the effort was not there, they received a zero and an email about taking the assignment seriously the next time. The note card assignments were worth 25 percent of the course grade, although it was possible to earn 28 percentage points from the assignment as 28 readings and podcasts were assigned during the term. I structured it this way for three reasons. First, having extra note cards allowed students to miss a few courses without penalty, which allowed me to have a no make-up policy. Second, the note cards due at the beginning of every class encouraged students to attend regularly and on time because I did not accept cards from students not in their seats by the beginning of class. Third, the opportunity for three percentage points of extra credit was a nice carrot for students who regularly attended and turned in all assignments.

In addition to using the note cards as a diagnostic tool, they were also used to facilitate classroom discussions every Friday. I would use the student questions and comments on the back of the 4x6 cards as a springboard to a conversation about applications of what we covered in class that week. During this time I also clarified and extended concepts that were covered in class but that the note cards revealed were not well understood. A surprising benefit of using the

note cards to facilitate discussion is that the cards were not only a great way to get conversation going, but they prevented the conversation from lagging. Any time discussion lagged I could go on to a question or comment from another card. In addition, by asking the student to elaborate on their question or comment, I was able to engage in classroom discussions several students who typically did not ask questions. In addition to being a diagnostic tool and helping me facilitate classroom discussion, I also found the cards to be a good source of material for short-answer questions on the midterm and final.

III. Conclusion

While I did not conduct research regarding the educational benefits of this approach, I feel that it provided benefits to me as the instructor by helping me improve my ability to lead classroom discussions. In addition, I was surprised how effective the note cards were as a diagnostic tool. They were helpful in ensuring that students did not fall too far behind without some form of intervention, such as an email and then an alert to the college's student support services.

That being said, however, I do have three caveats. First, the process of going through cards is time consuming, and thus it becomes almost unworkable with class sizes of forty or more. Second, other diagnostic tools, such as regular quizzes, might achieve the same goal at a lower cost. Third, this approach should never be used to suggest that we completely jettison lectures. As collective consumption goods, lectures are a cost-effective way to ensure that students are exposed to the tools necessary to think like an economist.

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