

Economics: Writing to Learn and Learning to Write

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For four years we have paired one section of an introductory economics class with two sections of a required freshman writing course. We believe our successful experience will be useful to other faculty members who may wish to try this or a similar interdisciplinary method of teaching. The purpose of this paper is to give an account of how we integrated our two disciplines to strengthen student learning of both. Students have achieved higher grades than those in other sections of the economics course and the instructor has received higher student evaluations. Student grades and evaluations are also higher in the writing course compared to other sections. Student comments are very favorable to this approach in both courses.

What is FIGS?

FIGS stands for Freshman Interest Groups. The idea is to have students with similar interests register as a group for more than one course. The program is voluntary, so there may be some self-selection. The objective of FIGS, as given by the University, is to develop an enriched intellectual and social relationship for both faculty and students (U.S. Impact, p. 1).

In addition to paper assignments, the writing instructor incorporates a less formal writing assignment-threaded discussion participation. This forum gives students the opportunity to write about issues related to economics without the pressure of a grade on the quality of the economic content or writing. The students received a grade based solely on the number of messages that they post; they are required to post 15 messages to receive full credit. Students think through what they are learning and writing about in our two classes on their own time and terms.

Interdisciplinary cooperation

It is important that each instructor recognizes that both subjects are academic disciplines. Writing has a theoretical base just as economics does. The courses are not naturally linked by a common theme, historical purpose or issue. Rather, the professors purposefully created a link in which economic issues discussed in Modern Political Economy are assimilated into the writing assignments of students in the composition courses. Likewise, writing assignments are integrated into the economic issues course.

We start the semester by meeting together with the students in the first class. We meet from time to time during the semester to discuss the progress of our courses. We meet about individual students and specific topics as needed. We feel free to phone each other or to drop in to the other professor's office, so there is considerable informal communication. We keep the other person informed of what is going on in our classes and of any changes in syllabi.

The grades given on a paper may be very different in the economics class and in the writing class. The economics professor grades the papers on economic content, not writing. Likewise, the writing professor does not grade the economic content. She does help students with the exposition of economic ideas. This makes it much more pleasurable for the economics professor to read the students' work. It also makes it easier for him to grade on the basis of economic content alone.

Integration of teaching methods

The economics course used in the program is a one semester economic issues course. The analysis is at the level of simple supply and demand. Agriculture is used as the first issue in the text. Initially about half the students in each class have said they expected farm policy to be deadly dull. However, we have found that role-playing helps generate interest. One student pretends to be a poor farmer and another a rich farmer. They then write a dialog about farm policy. This exercise, developed by the writing professor, greatly increases student interest in this topic.

The teaching method used in the economics course is a modified lecture method with emphasis on class discussion. However, in the writing classes students regularly work in small groups or pairs. They critique each other's writing and help each other improve their exposition. Since they are writing about economic topics, they help each other understand economics as well. When a student improves her presentation of economic analysis, often the analysis itself is improved. Even more often the student's understanding of the analysis she is undertaking is enhanced. Term papers are turned in for revision on the basis of comments by the economics professor.

The students write a letter to the editor or to a congressperson about some economic issues (minimum wage increase, social security, protection of the steel industry, for example). They write a letter to a friend about the costs and benefits of attending college. They write a review of a movie, noting the application of economic principles in it. The variety of writing assignments gives students an opportunity to apply economic reasoning while also helping them recognize the multiple discourses in which every subject is situated (Johnson-Eiola, p. 38).

Research methodology

In order to report on what we feel were successful outcomes of our instructional innovation, we must stress that we accumulated and analyzed our data with notions drawn especially from Composition Studies, in order to share in the ongoing academic conversations on unique pedagogics that seem to have worked. The results were analyzed in an admittedly subjective manner by the researchers and are not to be read as conclusive and binding in all situations. We asked ourselves the following questions:

- § Will linking assignments in writing to subject matter in economics help students learn the content of their economics courses?
- § Will linking assignments in writing to subject matter in economics help students become better writers?

§ In what ways will writing about the economic topics help students become better thinkers?

Our goals were as follows:

- § To guide students in becoming knowledgeable about basic theories and facts of Modern Political Economy;
- § To teach students to become better writers;
- § To help students become better thinkers by teaching them ways to analyze and interpret new knowledges through writing;
- § To become aware of the most effective types of writing assignments in a writing-to-learn environment.

Indicators of success

In Modern Political Economy half of the students' semester grades depends upon their performance in the written assignments. Half is based on objective, computer-graded tests. For the four years in which we have used this method, students' grades have been higher on the objective tests than they were when Modern Political Economy was a stand-alone course. This is not a scientific statistical result as there is no control for ACT (similar to SAT) scores, or for other factors which might have affected the results. Grades in this clustered course were also higher than in most of the sections of Modern Political Economy that were not clustered.

Student evaluations of teaching were higher in the clustered section of the economics course than in sections of the course taught by other faculty members. This is not statistically significant because these courses were taught by other faculty members and there is no control for any extraneous factors. The clustered section received the highest ratings of any Modern Political Economy section every semester. The number of sections for which data are available (all sections in the Fall, fewer in the Spring) ranged from 14 to 32. This is a strong indication of student satisfaction with the clustered concept in this class. The conclusion here is that this clustering method worked very, very well from the students' perspective. Student comments tend to be highly favorable. However,

interpretation of them is even more subjective than the Aobjective@ questions on the student evaluation form. Moreover, there is no question directly related to the clustered nature of the class. However, almost all comments which relate to it are very favorable.

It is fair to say that we believe we have achieved all of the goals we set out. This has required cooperation and flexibility on the part of both professors. It has also given us opportunities to take up topics which we would not otherwise have considered. For example, the economics text does not have a section on business ethics. The writing text does. This led to some of the most interesting discussions and an enhanced learning experience for students in the economics class. Likewise, discussion from the writing text of sweatshops fit in beautifully with discussion of international trade and international financial agencies.

Conclusion

This approach gave us an opportunity to innovate in integrating economics and writing in our respective classes. The data available to us led us to believe that students learned more and enjoyed these classes more as a result of our efforts. We believe that this apparent success should encourage others to attempt this interdisciplinary method of teaching.

References

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