
40 Teaching non-majors¹

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Economists' teaching methods have relied heavily, if not exclusively, on "chalk and talk," especially at the introductory level. According to a survey of teaching methods in 1995, 2000, and 2005 by Watts and Becker (2008), instructors made greater use of student-centered learning methods. Though the authors found that the standard lecture format was still the mainstay of instruction, more professors have adopted classroom discussions, cooperative learning, assignments in a computer lab, internet activities, games and simulations, applications to economic and financial news in the press, and even sports, popular fiction, music, and drama. Surprisingly, Watts and Becker found few differences in teaching methods across different types of courses. Writing assignments were more likely to be doled out in upper-division courses, yet writing assignments other than homework and problem sets remained "relatively rare" (p. 284). A scan of the past ten or fifteen volumes of the *Journal for Economic Education* provides excellent examples of assignments and techniques for those teachers who are willing to experiment and deviate from the norm. Websites are proliferating that are devoted to, for example, the applications of Hollywood movies or popular music to economics concepts and ideas.²

Economists' pedagogy is slowly changing and helping to retain the interest of potential economics majors. But instructors in academe teach more non-majors than majors; only 2 percent of US undergraduates choose to major in economics (Siegfried and Round, 2001).³ Economics professors are charged with introducing economics to students in other declared majors. Faculty colleagues and curriculum committees (across institution types) have decided that an understanding of basic economics is crucial to many disciplinary studies. Students also enroll in economics to fulfill a distribution requirement (for example, social sciences) for graduation. And most important of all, economists teach students with a variety of majors and interests who just want to learn more about a critical area of their lives – the economy. At my liberal arts college, for example, an economics course is required for students majoring in social work or preparing to teach social studies. Some of these students struggle mightily with the abstract graphical representations of the theory and wonder how it could apply to their profession and help them in their future career.

Unfortunately, by focusing on the study of "economics" and not "the economy," we run the risk of squeezing much of students' interest and zeal out of them (Figart, 2010a). College-level principles courses emphasize teaching tools to think like an economist (just look in any top-selling textbook, for example) rather than teaching about the real economy (Colander, 2006, ch. 4; Wunder, Kemp, and England, 2009). Students therefore learn the science of economics rather than broad issues related to public policy and how societies sustain themselves and grow, issues that have been the focus of economists, philosophers, and others for centuries. To students, it can appear as if what is taught is algebra and/or calculus rather than what many students expected following high school.

Today's students in colleges and universities, especially in the United States, are more

likely to enter principles of economics classes with some background in economics as well as exposure to topics in personal financial literacy. According to the (National) Council on Economic Education's *Survey of the States 2009*, 21 US states require students to take an economics course as a high school graduation requirement and 13 states require students to cover topics in financial literacy. As a result, students have already discussed the economy in social studies and business classes. Contextual lessons in high school, however, frequently emphasize understanding institutions, history, and current events. Students are interested in the economy in which they have to live and work. To borrow Tiemstra's phrase, students are interested in learning about the "history and institutions" of the economy (1999, p. 559), a more interdisciplinary emphasis than what is often stressed.

According to Caviglia-Harris (2003, p. 195), "Economic education research has not focused on interdisciplinary approaches or on the teaching of economics to nonmajors." This chapter aims to remedy the dearth of research in this area.⁴ It explores issues related to teaching alternative forms of introductory courses to non-majors, primarily as a key component of a liberal education. While some students may flourish in traditional introductory courses, economics professors have created distinctive courses for non-majors. Questions posed in this chapter address the mission of teaching non-majors: What are we teaching in terms of content? To what extent are we emphasizing abstract theories and associated techniques? Are we teaching interesting topics, and drawing students in? Do we teach what students need to know in order to feel empowered as economic actors and citizens if they never take another economics course?

APPROACHES TO TEACHING INTRODUCTORY ECONOMICS: WHAT ARE OUR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES?

An Economic Issues Course

If a primary goal of teaching non-majors is to make economics more relevant to students with diverse interests, then an economic issues course is an option. Introduction to economic issues is a frequent one-semester, introductory course intended for non-majors. A student who subsequently chooses to study economics further must then proceed to take principles of macro and micro. Publishers have responded to this market with textbook-equivalents on economic issues focused by topic or by theory or paradigm.⁵ Faculty can build these courses around a number of issues, selecting topics available in issues textbooks and/or having students vote on additional ones they wish to explore. The course may count toward an economics major, sending the message that the issues approach is "real economics."

Colleges and universities have also offered introductory economics courses that focus on particular economic issues. Such courses can be directly related to a regularly offered department of economics list of courses, or an interdisciplinary freshman (first-year) seminar or an honors program seminar. For example, Caviglia-Harris (2003) describes a model for teaching introductory economics at Salisbury University in Maryland, using environmental issues as the theme. Three faculty members team-taught the course around the topic of temperate and tropical forests. Class time was divided among three

key disciplinary approaches: economics, ecology, and philosophy. The economics “module” or segment covered fairly conventional concepts such as supply and demand, opportunity costs, comparative advantage, and market failure. Readings included selected chapters from a principles of economic textbook and an environmental economics textbook. Students found the course challenging and interesting. Though the course provided connections between the three disciplinary approaches, students seemed to be provided with a multidisciplinary perspective as opposed to one that was integrated or interdisciplinary.⁶

A multidisciplinary team-taught course on health issues by an economist and a sociologist at Spelman College in the US is another example of an economic issues course targeted at non-majors. At Spelman, both the economics and sociology departments approved the course, but only the sociology department allowed “Health – Sociological and Economic Perspectives” to be counted as an elective for the major. Institutional barriers were reflected upon by the instructors in the *Journal of Economic Education*:

The main issue involved in the institutional acceptance of the course was the economics department’s insistence that the course be restricted to only satisfy the social science core requirement. . . . The reasons for this may have reflected the traditional hostility of economics to sociology (which manifests itself in the relative lack of pluralism in economics programs compared to sociology programs). Further, the economics faculty may have feared the potential dilution of course enrollment of major electives in the economics department . . . (Wade and Stone, 2010, p. 76)

While serving the goal of reaching non-majors, this policy reflects an implicit devaluing of the issues course versus the core courses counted toward the undergraduate major in economics.

Freedman (2008), from Stevenson University in Maryland, has also designed a team-taught course to introduce economics issues to non-majors who are first-year honors students. She built the course around gender issues. Team-taught with an historian, both professors tried to weave the two disciplines together throughout the course. As the semester progressed, there was greater integration of the disciplines. This outcome was achieved because the instructors did not require a textbook. According to Freedman:

We did not assign any textbook for the course. Instead, we composed an extensive reading list, and we wanted to make sure that students read and comprehended these assigned readings on a basic level. In addition, we hoped that, by forcing the students to be active participants right from the start, we would be more successful in setting a seminar-type atmosphere from the beginning. (2008, p. 255)

Team-teaching an issues course can be quite expensive for administrative budgets because of faculty workload. It is unlikely that all participating faculty will receive 100 percent workload credit for the course over time. Further, traditional departments can reject the newly created courses as “soft” and inappropriate for their own majors. Thus, such courses tend to only count toward a student’s general education requirements.

Another drawback of the economic issues approach to teaching non-majors is elucidated by John Tiemstra from Calvin College in Michigan. Tiemstra (1999) argues that with some economic issues, abstract models still need to be introduced, but doing so seems both ad hoc and disconnected from the other models and issues: “. . . these students are

not in fact going on to further work in economics, so they will never get enough practice with abstract economic models to be able to use them effectively, or enough experience to be able to apply them wisely” (p. 560). Without a theoretical grounding, students’ positions on issues may be based on unexamined pre/misconceptions rather than a deeper understanding of the assumptions underlying alternative views.⁷

Fact-based Economic Literacy

A common alternative approach to teaching non-majors is an economic literacy course focusing on basic vocabulary and understanding the health of the US and global economies through economic indicators. Rather than theoretical modeling, such courses often emphasize objective economic facts, trends, and statistics. This allows the learner “to understand some of the realities of the economy they live in. From that starting point the student can go on to make decisions about where they envision the economy is going and also make normative suppositions about how the economy should be directed” (Wunder, Kemp, and England, 2009, p. 467).⁸

Naturally, instructors can target a specific audience when using this approach. In 1999, I created a course open to all non-majors, but primarily directed to majors in social work, political science, and social studies certification students in our teacher education program. All three of these populations are required or recommended to take an economics course for their degree. The largest constituency is social work majors. Historically, they were often advised to take introduction to microeconomics because somewhere in week 12 or 13 they might learn about poverty and income inequality!

The approach has been to focus on economic literacy through the study of everyday economic indicators and some alternative theoretical and policy debates about how to improve those indicators. The course description reads:

This course provides an introduction to the discipline of economics and the subject of how economic life is organized in the United States. Students will first be introduced to the ways in which economists analyze economic and social problems and the basic measures of economic life and well-being. Next we will discuss how economists measure poverty, income distribution, and inequality. We will also examine economic policy. Throughout, considerable attention will be placed on understanding competing interpretations of the role that economic actors, including businesses, households, and the government, play in economic growth and well-being. (Figart 2010b)

In the course, students learn how to utilize government websites to find and analyze economic indicators such as GDP, unemployment, inflation, budget deficits and surpluses, food insecurity, poverty, income distribution and inequality, and the race- and gender-based wage gaps.⁹ They develop statistical literacy along with economic literacy, including the ability to write papers using quantitative evidence.

One homework assignment requires students to visit the website of the US Bureau of Labor Statistics to find news releases on unemployment and asks them to answer the following overall questions: How has the economy of the United States been doing in meeting the macroeconomic goal of “full employment?” Have jobs been readily available in the US economy over the past 36 months? Do current measures of employment growth (or decline) differ across demographic groups (race, age, education level, etc.),

regions/states of the US, and why? Parallel assignments cover topics including the inflation rate (CPI), GDP, and poverty. An indicator not typically covered in principles of economics, the US Department of Agriculture's annual measure of food security, is also important for non-majors, especially social workers. One project is an essay:

Two essential elements of provisioning are food and housing. Yet both can be difficult for the working poor to provide for themselves on a regular basis. As we prepare to celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday and take time to appreciate the material goods that we have been fortunate to enjoy, this assignment will focus on those who are less fortunate. Your assignment is to write a short descriptive essay summarizing the problem of food insecurity in the US. Your essay will incorporate quantitative evidence on the extent of food insecurity. Go to the US Department of Agriculture website¹⁰ and look for the links to the section on food security.

Be sure to address the following questions:

- What is the definition of food security/insecurity?
- Briefly explain the process the USDA uses to measure food security and insecurity.
- What was the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger in 2010? (Hint: Look for the PDF file of the reports titled *Household Food Security in the United States*.)
- From the same report, summarize the level of food security/insecurity by US state, race-ethnicity, household type, and other salient demographic categories. (Figart, 2010b)

In each of the written assignments on economic indicators, students need to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the indicator(s) and suggest what the indicator may not be revealing. In a sense, then, a fact-based economic literacy course reveals a process as opposed to a specific outcome; economic statistics are one way of portraying some "facts" about the economy, but those facts are products of a data design and data-collection process that involves human decisions and public policy.

A broader approach to economic literacy is learning about our capitalist economy. Lynn Duggan from Indiana University, who teaches in a labor studies program, has a lengthy course description of an introductory course for non-majors that includes the following:

This course is an introduction to the current situation of workers and families in the US economy To do this we need to learn about capitalism – how is it working, and how it could work better? . . . We'll also look at the global context that surrounds the US economy, including the pressures faced by working people in other countries (both those who work for pay and those who do unpaid work). . . . Our emphasis will be on intuitive understanding, rather than memorization of mathematical formulas. (Duggan, 2010)

In her course, Duggan spends a considerable amount of time trying to have students understand and critically assess how capitalism works within and among economic sectors, and its affect on workplaces, well-being, and public policy. One of two required readings for the course is *Understanding Capitalism* by Bowles, Edwards, and Roosevelt (2005). Professors with similar goals and objectives have assigned *Economics for Everyone: A Short Guide to the Economics of Capitalism* by Stanford (2008).

In the Netherlands, Irene Van Staveren from the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University teaches a similar course using the Stanford book, with more emphasis on economic development for students majoring in interdisciplinary development studies. Van Staveren will often ask her students to enrich their work with

examples from their home countries. The objective of the course explains that it is a non-technical introduction to economics:

This economics course teaches real-world economics, which is a more democratic economics not using high abstract terminology and mathematics. It is closer to the experiences of us all in every day life. This enables all of us to better understand the economy and to participate in debates about the economy and to influence economic policies. (Van Staveren, 2010)

Another choice is to approach teaching economics as a discipline grounded in contending worldviews as a way to engage students' interest, while nurturing their critical instincts. For example, Edward J. O'Boyle, a longtime member of the faculty at Louisiana Tech University describes his one-term principles of economics course for non-business majors: "The general goal of the course is to instruct the beginning student as to how a capitalist economy functions and dysfunctions from both a conventional-economics perspective which underscores economics as the study of things and from a social-economics perspective which focuses on human beings as the subject of economics" (1999, p. 531).

What these course descriptions and assignments have in common is their emphasis on critical thinking, critical reasoning, and interrogating the economy, economic statistics, and economic relationships. They also have in common a learning objective focused on helping students understand economics and the economy through an analysis of economic ideas and/or economic history. Zohreh Emami of Alverno College in Wisconsin echoes that this is a key goal in her general education economics course (Emami, 1999).

Teaching non-majors by building a course around economic literacy necessarily means that the goals and objectives of the course will be different from a standard principles of macroeconomics or microeconomics course. While supply and demand graphs, marginal analysis, cost-benefit analysis, and other tools of economic thinking can serve the goals of advancing liberal education, they can also be taught in a way that reinforces disciplinary boundaries by discouraging students from making connections between method and applications to the economy and society. General education goals may be furthered if an economic literacy course includes writing, critical thinking, and skills such as reading and understanding websites and newspapers. These skills are critical to serving emerging visions of liberal education such as the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (see AAC&U, 2007; 2010).

Economic Journalism

Another common way to teach non-majors is through story-telling. Susan Feiner from the University of Southern Maine favors this approach. To get students' attention in everyday economic life, faculty members such as Feiner have built courses around journalistic narratives that describe the lived economy. Although these serve as attention-getters, they are also applications of key economic concepts and issues.

For instance, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich spent a year reporting on and living with people in the top 1 percent of the income distribution. Feiner (2010) suggests that the chapter in *Richistan* on bigger-is-better is compelling because students learn concepts such as conspicuous consumption and how social norms foster "keeping up

with the Joneses,” as in: “Your yacht is only 250 feet, well mine is bigger.” This not only engages students, but allows professors to introduce economics concepts in an applied way. *Richistan* can be supplemented with Shell’s book, *Cheap* (2010), on the history of retailing since the 1950s, focusing on themes of consumerism and happiness (Feiner, 2010, 25 August). Non-majors may be better served by discussing emulation of consumption among income levels rather than learning how to differentiate normal goods from inferior goods. They could debate whether to distinguish needs versus wants rather than graphing marginal utility.

There are numerous journalistic accounts of workers and families trying to create a life for themselves and trying to make ends meet. One notable and oft-assigned book in social sciences and freshman seminar courses in the US is the best-selling *Nickel and Dimed* by Ehrenreich. Alternatively, *Cheap Motels and a Hot Plate* (Yates, 2007) chronicles the day-to-day lives of people at the bottom of the economic ladder (low-paid jobs, jobs in more depressed economic communities), supplementing economic statistics with case studies. This “road book” swings through the American southwest, with stops including Santa Fe, New Mexico, Flagstaff, Arizona, and Estes Park, Colorado, and the author narrates striking, moving, and meaningful exchanges on the experiences of people of color and native American Indians, such as:

More than one million black men and women are in our jails and prisons, about the same number as whites, though the black share of the population is less than one-sixth that of whites. It is more likely that a black person of college age is in prison than in college. There are no economic indicators showing a black (or Hispanic or American Indian) advantage. Black median income, whether for families or individuals, is less than whites, as is wealth. Black wages are lower. Black poverty rates are higher, by wide margins. Black unemployment rates are typically double white rates. All of these indicators show differences between blacks and whites even after variables that might influence them are held constant. (Yates, 2007, pp. 247–8)

One could easily imagine a web-based investigation and writing assignment that requires that students find the most recent specific economic statistics that Yates refers to in this reflection paragraph.

CONCLUSIONS: CRITICAL IDEAS, STARTING WITH THE DEFINITION OF ECONOMICS

Teaching students about the economy in order to prepare them for rich lives as economic actors and citizens is certainly as important as socializing the next generation of economists. When we teach to non-majors, it is important to know who our students are (see also Arvidson, 2008). Are they training to be social workers or social studies teachers? Are the students drawn from different countries and interested in economic development? Are they labor studies students with vast experience in the workplace? Perhaps students in the natural sciences or engineering are urged to take an economics course and are very familiar with and comfortable with algebra and calculus and prefer quantitative tools. All students are not homogeneous.

When we teach, we need to have a vision. We need to set goals and objectives. These are guided by our expertise but should also be grounded in who our students are. Our

students are delivered a message about what those goals and objectives are on day #1, not just on the syllabus but in the content delivered in the very first class. The definition of economics is a good place to start. That definition of what we study delivers a message about where we are taking our students while we have them in our classes. There are two contrasting paths, emanating from two contrasting definitions. In my courses, but especially in my course for non-majors, I begin with these two contrasting definitions:

1. Economics studies the efficient allocation of the scarce means of production toward the satisfaction of human wants (from any standard textbook).
2. “Economics is the study of the way people organize themselves to sustain life and enhance its quality” (Goodwin, Nelson, and Harris, 2009, p. 3, inspired by institutional and social economists who maintain that economics studies “the provisioning of human life,” the commodities and processes necessary for human survival (Nelson, 2006; Figart, 2007)).

I then relate to my students that we will be tackling concepts and issues that draw upon the latter definition. The second definition focuses on the processes that constitute our economic lives rather than introducing a particular mode of analysis. It defines economics in terms of its subject matter rather than methodology. It does not embed a bias in favor of efficiency over all other possible economic goals. This broader definition of our subject matter engages students in enduring questions central to a liberal education.

What many of the economics principles alternatives to teaching non-majors have in common is the emphasis on critical thinking and critical reasoning, through reading the kinds of non-fiction trade books that we hope a college graduate would continue to read as part of lifelong learning, and writing essays and papers that address complex questions with more than one possible answer. Such assignments resemble assignments in other courses in the liberal arts and are consistent with the argument that economics (and non-majors alike) should encounter more “big think” questions (see Colander and McGoldrick, 2009). What unites the content is that instructors build courses around focusing on the state of the everyday economy and how it affects workers, households and families, sectors, and countries.

These skills are some of the “essential learning outcomes” that the Association of American Colleges & Universities has defined as critical for twenty-first century liberal education (AAC&U, 2010). The first learning outcome focuses on content knowledge that involves “engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring.” Beyond content knowledge, however, the architects of LEAP (Liberal Education and America’s Promise) also emphasize the attainment of “intellectual and practical skills,” including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative and information literacy, problem solving, and teamwork. These are to be practiced across the curriculum. AAC&U also emphasizes the need for applied learning, civic engagement, and lifelong learning. Those of us who teach economics need to seriously engage the challenges of providing a liberal education to all of our students. Teaching non-majors about economic life is one way to address these challenges.

NOTES

1. The author would like to thank Susan Feiner, Ellen Mutari, and Martha Starr for comments on a previous draft.
2. See, for instance, Chapter 21 by Bohanon and Vachris in this volume.
3. A nationally representative survey shows that about 60 percent of all undergraduates take at least one course in economics; of non-economics and non-business majors, about 47 percent completed at least one economics course (Bosshardt and Watts, 2008).
4. A related topic is an evaluation of the economics major, itself. That is not covered here, but it is handled well in *Educating Economists: The Teagle Discussion on Re-evaluating the Undergraduate Economics Major* (Colander and McGoldrick, 2009).
5. Popular books assigned have included the *Taking Sides* and *Annual Editions* series (Bonello and Lobo, 2010; Cole, 2009), *Economic Issues and Policy* (Brux, 2011), *Issues in Economics Today* (Guell, 2010), *Current Economic Issues* (Fireside et al., 2009), and the formerly published *Economics Issues Today: Alternative Approaches* (Carson et al., 2005).
6. This approach to economic education is further described in Chapter 22 “The Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching Economics” in this volume.
7. Grimes (2009) adds that the social issues approach has failed to thrive, or even survive at a majority of institutions.
8. By the phrase “economic literacy,” I explicitly mean understanding economic indicators loosely as “facts,” and this also includes assessing the strengths and weaknesses of those indicators. This is not a one-to-one correlation with any book that has economic literacy in its title since the book may be an alternative approach to teaching economics principles (see, for example, Weaver, 2011).
9. They also learn the basics of supply and demand and the difference between neoclassical and political economy theories of discrimination. One of the books used is *Unlevel Playing Fields* (Albelda, Drago, and Shulman, 2010).
10. <http://www.usda.gov> (accessed 14 June 2011).

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