

Active Learning in Economics: Increasing Student Engagement, Excitement and Success

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Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember;
involve me and I'll understand. (Chinese proverb)

One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it—
you have no certainty until you try. (Sophocles)

Active learning is not new. By definition, active learning has forever been at the heart of the human desire to explore, discover and share knowledge. Early humans did not sit through lectures on the use of fire or which plants were safe to eat. The Socratic method's use of questions to stimulate critical thinking recognizes the importance of engaging the learner in the process of learning. Nevertheless, the relatively passive learning environment of the lecture was the dominant form of pedagogy, particularly in higher education, for hundreds of years.

Recognizing the shortcomings of passive learning methods, Dewey and Dewey (1915) argued for the importance of student engagement in the learning process:

“The Teacher and the book are no longer the only instructors; the hands, the eyes, the ears, in fact the whole body, become sources of information, while teacher and textbook become respectively the starter and the tester. No book or map is a substitute for personal experience; they cannot take the place of the actual journey” (p. 74).

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Active learning has become increasingly popular since the 1991 publication of the Association for the Study of Higher Education's report "Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom." In the report, (Bolton and Eison 1991, p. 19) describe five characteristics of active learning in the college classroom:

1. Students are involved in more than passive listening
2. Students are engaged in activities (e.g., reading, discussing, writing)
3. There is less emphasis placed on information transmission and greater emphasis placed on developing student skills
4. There is greater emphasis placed on the exploration of attitudes and values
5. Students are involved in higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation)

The appeal of these characteristics has led to the development of numerous pedagogical methods. Many of these are simple to implement and stand alone from the overall structure of the course (e.g., think-pair-share activities, one-minute papers, classroom experiments), while others require an instructor to fundamentally rethink the organization of the course (e.g., any number of "flipped classroom" techniques such as Team-based Learning [TBL]). Regardless of the specific technique, the common theme is moving the student away from the sidelines of the learning process with the result that the student's engagement leads to a better and deeper understanding of the material and the development of learning skills that extend beyond the subject matter at hand and into lifelong learning.

What follows in this special issue of *International Advances in Economic Research* is a series of papers describing active learning in the business and economics curriculum. While they vary from examples of single assignments to case studies of reorganizing complete courses, each provides outstanding practical examples and advice that can be applied both within and outside of the economics discipline.

John Fizel's paper "A Presentation-based Course in Sports Economics" describes how he has completely organized this course around student-led presentations. He finds this method to be a useful way to deal with what he explains as a conundrum with a sports economics course, namely that 'students enter with expectations of spending a term talking about sports, not economics.' The student-led presentations allow him to maintain the excitement students bring to such a class, while at the same time allowing students to delve deep into the economics content. The paper also contains an outstanding discussion of "How Learning Works" summarized from Ambrose et al. (2010). The six principles described within this framework can really be applied to all of the papers in this special issue and get at the heart of why active learning results in stronger student outcomes and achievement.

In "Flipping Out! A Case Study on How to Flip the Principles of Economics Classroom" authors Jose Vazquez and Eric Chiang detail their experiences 'flipping' large principles of microeconomics classes. The flipped classroom is the situation in which students are expected to review much class material using various assignments and learning tools before coming to class, leaving class time for more active learning activities. The paper provides an excellent synopsis of the

recent literature on this technique as well as a discussion of best practices based on their experiences and empirical analysis which could be used to improve the effectiveness of a flipped classroom model in any field.

Gerald Baumgardner continues this theme in “Cooperative Learning as a Supplement to the Economics Lecture.” The interdependence which becomes an integral part of learning in the cooperative-learning environment provides many benefits including improving skills in team work, critical thinking, and communication. He provides examples of various types of cooperative-learning assignments as well as empirical evidence indicating improved student learning outcomes.

Two of the papers describe the use of TBL in economics. The first, “Getting Students to *do* Economics: An Introduction to Team-Based Learning” by Jennifer Imazeki, provides an excellent description of TBL as applied to an upper-level data analysis course for economics majors. In addition to providing details of how TBL was implemented in the course, she also provides an outstanding discussion of student experiences and reactions to TBL. Her students report that TBL is highly engaging and more likely to make them want to attend class. She concludes with very practical advice for those considering implementing TBL in their classrooms.

My own paper, “Student Demographics and the Impact of Team-Based Learning” continues the discussion of this technique. In the paper I report on the learning outcomes and experiences of students in principles of microeconomics and quantitative methods courses, comparing outcomes and experiences based on several different demographic characteristics. TBL, and active learning in general, has been suggested as a way to reduce the achievement gap between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students. In the paper, I find a small, but significant, learning outcome improvement for disadvantaged students compared to others. I also discuss and report on the subjective experiences of students with TBL.

Christina Robinson’s paper “Penalty Kicks—A Classroom Experiment” provides an overview of the challenges and benefits of using classroom experiments in undergraduate economics courses. She also describes an example experiment based on penalty kicks in soccer that can be used to demonstrate both the complexity and importance of random strategies in simultaneous-move, zero-sum games. She provides full materials for those wanting to implement this classroom experiment.

“Bridging the Classroom Gap between Asset Pricing and Business Cycle Theory” by Mike Aguilar and Daniel Soques also describes a specific approach that can be applied in the classroom. In this case, they describe a way to connect macroeconomic theory to asset pricing, two topics that may seem disjoint in the macroeconomics curriculum. Their approach, connecting cash flows to the level of economic activity and the discount rate to the risk-free interest rate, provides a useful framework in which instructors can explain the Great Recession. The authors provide a detailed description, discussion and examples for those interested in utilizing this approach in the classroom.

Carlos Liard-Muriente and Christina Robinson describe the use of the Write Experience software to increase their students’ exposure to open-ended questions and provided the opportunity for students to hone their written communication skills in “The Write Experience in Economics: A Case Study from Central Connecticut State University.” The use of such software can help to overcome resistance to including more writing assignments in the curriculum such as resource and time constraints or a

lack of experience teaching writing. The paper details their experience using this software. The authors' empirical analysis allows them to identify the factors that influence the quality of the students' written work. They find that the written communication skills of students differ by race, gender, and field of study, making a good argument for continued development of writing skills throughout the curriculum.

Finally, Susan McGorry and Michael Gallagher describe the undergraduate business capstone project at DeSales University in their paper "Service Learning and the Capstone Experience." Service learning, which combines meaningful community service with instruction, is an active-learning strategy which can take place in many different forms. Service learning not only gives students a chance to practice and apply their classroom knowledge, but also provides practical "real world" experience and has spillover benefits to the community. Their paper describes how a service-learning project was incorporated into their business curriculum and analyzes students' experiences with the project.

Collectively, these papers illustrate the wide variety of active-learning methods that can be incorporated into the economics and business curriculum to engage students in the learning process. Regardless of how active learning is implemented, students benefit from a classroom that attempts more than knowledge transmission but also focuses on valuable lifelong learning skills.

References

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