Making Course Content Conducive To A Marriage Between Theory And Practice: One Instructor's Experience

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Abstract

This essay describes the changes made in the structure of a course on gender and economics that have the potential for improving undergraduate economics education by providing opportunities for students to "be economists" in their communities. Specifically, it describes the value of incorporating exercises that send students into the field to observe and gather data that they can bring back into the classroom to analyze and integrate into their own understanding of the issues.

1. Introduction

common complaint voiced by many students, who take an economics course, at any level, is that the course content is often divorced from reality and thus does not contribute substantially to their learning (Jacobsen 1994). Many find the subject too abstract and hard to grasp since it neither describes nor appeals to their desire for relevance to the real world in which they live (Lewis 1995). As a result most students study just "for" the exams instead of engaging in "continuous" semester long study of the subject and increasingly adopt a utilitarian approach towards their economics education, wanting an effortless and good grade.

With this reality in mind, in the year 2000 when I got the opportunity to teach a course on the economics of gender, I jumped at the prospect of engaging students in topics that would acknowledge their real-life experiences. Since I had never taught the course before, I conducted an informal Internet survey of the syllabuses available online to see what other instructors were doing in their classrooms. The Google search revealed that all instructors, regardless of geographical location and school type, incorporated and designed their course around exams, assignments, oral presentations and term or research papers. I too did the same. However, I was surprised by the kind of problems that surfaced with this approach.

It is generally believed that writing assignments play an essential role in encouraging critical thinking, exploration of values and self-discovery (Shackelford 1992). However, I found that assigning research papers was an ineffective learning tool for a large number of students enrolled in the course. Not only was the writing very poor, there was also a huge variance in the students approach as well as seriousness to exploring the ideas of their chosen research topic. Despite specific guidelines, to most students, the main reason for overall poor quality of their papers was the inability of the instructor to communicate effectively the assessment criteria of the written assignments.

Moreover, most students did not avail the several opportunities to work with the instructor on revising drafts of their research papers. It became clear over the course of the semester that students were not willing to put time and effort into writing and revising if doing so would not fulfill their general education requirement for supplemental writing skills. Furthermore, there was also a general sense of skepticism amongst the students in the classroom towards the figures on employment, earnings, time allocation between work and home and the gender differences inherent in them. For instance in students view if nonmarket work was split evenly between them and their significant others, the numbers revealing more household work done by women on average in the US could not be telling a true story.

These observations and concerns lead me to believe that significant changes were needed in both the methodology and process of teaching in my gender and economics classroom so as to stimulate the class and enrich it academically. This essay describes those changes.

2. My Students

Grand Valley State University is the fastest growing comprehensive, public supported institution in Michigan with an enrollment of over 20,000 (3,500 graduate students), with the main campus in Allendale as well as an urban campus in downtown Grand Rapids, the center of Michigan's second largest population area. The University places emphasis on offering a strong liberal, professional, and international education that will prepare students to take their place in the global community. About 61 percent of the student body at Grand Valley is female. The large majority (96 percent) of the students are from Michigan. The student body is approximately 89.3 percent White, 4.4 percent African American, 2.2 percent Hispanic, 1.9 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and 2.2 percent others.

3. The Course

ECO 350, Gender and Economics, examines the causes and consequences of gender differences in labor market outcomes. Topics covered include allocation of time between the household and the labor market, consequences of employment for family structure, theories of discrimination, antipoverty programs, comparable worth, parental leave, and affirmative action. Historical trends and cross-cultural comparisons are also discussed at length along with current U.S. conditions.

Gender and Economics is an upper-division elective course with no prerequisite requirement. However, since the department of economics is in the business school, most of the students taking the course have either had introductory microeconomics or macroeconomics. The text is Joyce Jacobsen's Economics of Gender (1994). The theoretical material in her textbook offers a neoclassical perspective on the economic circumstances of men and women.

ECO 350 is also part of the general education "Gender, Society and Culture" theme. All undergraduate students enrolled at Grand Valley are required to choose a theme by their sophomore year. Once a theme is identified, students are required to take three courses from three disciplines within the theme. The goal of the Gender, Society and Culture theme is to introduce students to an academic examination of gender and gender issues from interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and historical perspectives. Specifically, the theme focuses on various "ideas" or perspectives on gender and the implications of these perspectives on the level of the individual (human development, personality, and identity), and society (culture, gender roles, statuses, social organization, religion or ideology). Each course in the theme examines a particular aspect of sex and/or gender within a larger context. In an academic year six courses from the disciplines of Anthropology, Economics, History, Legal Studies, Philosophy and Sociology are offered in the theme.

Because writing encourages both student learning and the exploration of ideas, Grand Valley requires that all students take two supplemental writing skills (SWS) courses, typically one in their major and one in general education. On average 50-60 students each year declare economics or business economics as their major. While there are ample economics courses to fulfill the writing skills requirement, ECO 350 does not have the SWS designation.

4. Traditional Course Structure

I firmly believe, as documented in the literature, that the students who are assigned writing projects in their classes learn the course material more effectively than those who do not (Jacobsen 1994). So in the fall of 2000 when I was given the opportunity to teach Gender and Economics, I structured the course around a lot of writing assignments (see Panel A of Table 1). In particular, the students were required to maintain a journal of their experiences in the classroom, write five short papers and a research paper. While the students were encouraged to

work in groups of two on the short papers based on assigned readings in the class, the research paper had to be their own independent effort. Despite the opportunity to work in groups, it became clear as the semester progressed that the students preferred to work in isolation primarily because of scheduling conflicts. Most of the students enrolled in the class were from the business school and worked 30 hours on average besides carrying a full-time load of classes. As a result they found it difficult to meet with a classmate on a regular basis and to avail of the opportunity to learn from one another.

The problems I encountered, however, were not limited to scheduling difficulties; they also extended to the quality of writing. Although, most of the students enrolled in the class were of junior or higher standing and majoring in a branch of business with presumably a background of ample writing intensive coursework; the level of writing was not reflective of this education. Most of the writing in the research and short papers was poor, lacking structural neatness, level of understanding, coherence, clarity, depth, consistency, and originality of arguments. The resulting huge variance in the final product not only made grading and providing constant and consistent feedback to the 35 student research papers and 175 short papers, over the course of the semester, very time consuming, but also lead to several complaints and debates over the assessment of writing. Specifically, a lot of students were of the opinion that if the course did not have a SWS designation they should not be asked to work too hard on their writing. Clearly, not a set of good circumstances to be in for an untenured professor at an institute that pays equal emphasis to faculty teaching and research.

Troubled by unsatisfactory student work and hostile reactions to the extent and quantity of writing requirement, I discussed the issues with several colleagues and was surprised and relieved to learn that the problems I experienced were not unique to my course. A lively discussion ensued in which a number of faculty lamented a growing disconnect between themselves and their students. While some attributed the problem to the change in student characteristics and attitudes, others described faculty attitudes and practices as a major issue. Although, the faculty disagreed on the source of the problem, they were united in rating the effectiveness of different teaching methods based on both qualitative and quantitative feedback gathered from business students over the years. According to them, students in the business school have repeatedly rated real world applications of the theoretical material covered in the classroom as the most effective teaching tool over writing research papers and supplemental readings.

The difficulties I encountered in the classroom coupled with the general observation that today's student expects to be actively engaged in the production of knowledge, as opposed to the routine classroom practices that limit intellectual stimulation (Siegfried et al. 1991) made me realize that changes were needed in both methodology as well as the process of teaching in my classroom. These observations also reinforced my need to situate the course in the real world of contemporary economic issues so as to engage the students effectively by appealing to their desire for connection between theory and the real world they inhabit (Lewis 1995) without simultaneously changing the course content. The skepticism I found amongst my students on issues of gender differences challenged me further to develop exercises that would enable the students to explore their own biases and assumptions, encourage them to see that their experiences may be anecdotal and may not reflect systematic problems and outcomes and thus expose them to the construction of knowledge and the process of learning.

The following section describes the changes I made to the Fall 2001 offering of ECO 350, Gender and Economics, to address the concerns raised above.

5. New Course Structure

The course Gender and Economics is only offered once during the academic year in the fall semester. In the second offering of the course in fall 2001, the enrollment went up to 42 from 35 in the previous fall. Thirteen of the 42 students were male and the remaining 29 were female. While I made no changes to the course content and the required textbook, I removed the list of recommended readings from the syllabus and made writing more meaningful to the students by changing the nature of the course assignments (see Panel B of Table 1). Although the journal requirement was retained as is, instead of responding and reacting to assigned/supplemental readings, students were provided topics to write on as a means of placing themselves or the work patterns of their family in the general

historical context to enable them to discover if their personal experiences were unique or reflected the majority of people in the US economy.

The requirement of five short papers was replaced by a service-learning exercise. The students in the class were divided into teams of two and were required to visit and conduct a short analysis of a single nonprofit organization dealing with the issues of gender in their West Michigan community. This exercise was designed to offer students an opportunity to study their own community through its voluntary organizations, to enhance student learning by joining theory with experience and thought with action and most importantly to expose students to the relevance of the academic subject to the real world. To economize on time, students were given a list of nonprofit organizations in their community so that they could identify a particular organization with a specific goal they wished to work on. Each group was then required to write a three to five page evaluation of their efforts and was given some questions, addressing which could help them to keep the writing clear and focused.

To reorganize the learning environment as well as to expand beyond the classroom walls so as to move the students into a site of action within their community (Aerni et al. 1999), I replaced the independent research paper with a course research project. Since the need to create a more inclusive and complete experience for the students was of paramount concern to me, I designed the course project to include a variety of activities such as collecting, inputting and analyzing data with appropriate statistical package, and writing reports. In other words, to help students learn how to apply the theoretical and empirical tools of economics in understanding the circumstances of men and women in their West Michigan community the course project required them

- To examine gender differences in the allocation of time between work, home and leisure and evaluate the competing economic explanations of these differences.
- To determine what, if any, influence the change in women's employment patterns had on the time use of men and women and
- To determine if the pattern of time use and the determinants of time use vary depending on the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the individuals studied.
- To meet the goals of the study the research project was divided into three steps.

First, each student was made responsible for designing and developing a survey to meet the objectives of the time allocation study. Students were informed that their proposed survey should describe in detail all measures, assessments, and questionnaires they wished to use. A reading packet comprising of articles and studies done on the subject of time use patterns of men and women was made available to the students to help them identify important variables to include in their survey, establish the context of the problem at hand, in their survey design and establish the significance of the survey. To build an incentive structure, the design and development phase of the course project comprised 15% of the student's grade. Based on the input received from the students a 28-question survey was constructed to gather information on time allocation from the West Michigan community (see Appendix).

Second, to gather data on time allocation the students were required to collectively prepare the materials to be inserted in each envelope so that they could be mailed out to 700 households in West Michigan. Each packet contained a self-addressed postage free envelope and a letter stating the purpose of the study along with the necessary instructions such as the date the surveys were needed by. The department of economics at Grand Valley generously picked up all of the mailing costs. One week after the mailing deadline, the surveys received were divided equally amongst the students in the class. An excel template was made available at the course website along with instructions to the students on how to input the gathered data. These tasks were responsible for 20% of a student's letter grade. Finally, for the remaining 15% of the course project grade, each student was required to submit a brief and comprehensive analysis of the entire data gathered by the class with an emphasis on outlining the purpose, expected results and actual results of the project.

6. Advantages Of Using The New Pedagogical Strategy

As mentioned earlier, the use of action oriented learning as a pedagogical tool to make connections between theory and the real world has not been widely adopted in economics classrooms (Young 1991) and is rarely

paired with writing. Despite the student complaints, they are infrequently given the opportunity to put the economics they learn in their classrooms to work. However, there are several advantages to incorporating such data collection activities into a class. First, such exercises demonstrate important course material in a relevant, meaningful and memorable manner (Jacobsen 1994). They also illustrate the wider applicability of the content covered in class and help to establish the "connection between theory, method and empirical observation" (Lewis 1995). Second, these exercises give students an idea about how to collect and use data gathered from a survey of individual households. More importantly, students learn about the difficulties involved in data collection such as "invalid responses, interpretation of responses and a subject's interpretation of the questions in the survey" (Jacobsen 1994).

Third, through writing project reports students get a chance to compare, contrast and connect their views and ideas toward a goal of achieving a greater understanding of the discipline (Aerni et al. 1999). Moreover, the pedagogical strategy of taking the students beyond the classroom and the academic institution provides an invaluable opportunity to guide and focus student skepticism by providing examples from communities around them. While, part of the value of such exercises is to combine the results for the class to expose students to general trends as opposed to individual behavior, part of the value is in establishing the important connection between material and the community (Jacobsen 1994; Aerni et al. 1999). Fourth, a course project provides a common experience among the students and helps to create predetermined learning objectives as a basis of evaluating student's performances (McGoldrick 1999). The resulting emphasis on cooperation between the instructor and student in achieving the objectives of the research project rather than on competition with other students may also enhance performance via establishing comfort with the evaluation process (Ziegert and Sullivan 1999).

Fifth, to the extent that these alternative techniques display the relevance of the theories discussed in the classroom to the student's life in a way that is participatory and gives the students a voice in the course, they are empowering (Jacobsen 1999). Sixth, the learning environment resulting from such pedagogical exercises in the classroom, provide students with "knowledge, skills and strategies for active participation in the real world" (Aerni et al. 1999). Finally from the instructors perspective, a course project of the type described above is a less time-intensive alternative to some of the traditional learning tools and writing exercises, does not require a lot of preparation and class time, is straightforward to grade, and most of all easier to administer as the class size increases.

7. How The Students Responded To The Changes

ECO 350 was evaluated via the standard evaluation forms used by all the departments in the business school. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), students on average rated the course 4.606 and the instructor 4.676. Evaluations of the same course taught without assignments that established a link between theory and practice in Fall 2000 averaged 4.447 for the course and 4.652 for the instructor (see Table 2). On the seven-question evaluation form, the average increase was 0.16. While the students rated the Fall 2001 offering of Gender and Economics, higher on all questions raised, the largest improvement was observed for a gain in students understanding of the concepts and principles in the subject area followed by students finding themselves challenged to think critically and independently about the subject.

Judging by the uniformly good teaching evaluations, it is clear that extraordinary learning opportunities result when students are involved in the creation of a research idea, scholarly exploration and analysis, and presentation of findings and results. Moreover, increase in class size from 35 to 42 as well as the comments made by students in person and via email suggest that the overall response to the changes made in the pedagogical strategy were positive. Some of the comments made in the written portion of the evaluation form are also instructive:

- "The professor made me open up my mind and actually think about male/female differences. I also liked that the instructor challenged the students to work and think a lot outside of class. The instructor made the classroom very relaxed so everyone had the chance to discuss their opinions. She is the best instructor I have had in terms of making me think a ton about issues that mean a lot."
- "The research project was a great addition to the class and I learned a tremendous amount about gender and economics from it."

- "I thoroughly enjoyed taking this class. I had a negative opinion about it to begin with but ended up enjoying it a lot. The class was well prepared with very interesting, relevant and helpful course exercises. I gained a lot of knowledge about gender differences as well as life lessons."
- "I liked doing the survey in Grand Rapids, I feel I learnt a lot from it. The extensive media coverage of the results of the course survey was a great pay off to a semesters worth of hard work."

Furthermore, in one-on-one conversations with me, most students commented that they appreciated the opportunity the course project provided them to work together to reach a common goal. Most found the experience of doing something real very rewarding and had never imagined that they would be involved in an exercise of this magnitude while at school. Also, according to the class, the vast media coverage that the results of the study received in the leading local newspapers as well as radio stations provided them a sense of ownership and accomplishment that was unprecedented.

Students also recognized some other benefits of the course project that extended beyond the classroom walls. While two students used the data for their capstone courses in the next semester, three students shared the results of the collaborative class study with the Grand Valley community on Student Scholarship Day (SSD). Held in April of every year the SSD celebrates academic achievement and provides students with an opportunity to present their scholarly work with thousands of people including peers, faculty, family and friends, and the general public. To some student's publication of survey results was of great value as they could add it to their resumes, others felt that the opportunity to develop a familiarity with the basic methods of economic analysis was unique and would put them in good stead for a variety of jobs in a broad range of fields upon graduation.

I also noticed a marked change and improvement in student writing. Although, this could be a result of the writing background and skills of the students enrolled in the class, I feel it was more a result of creating a learning environment that not only informed students about how knowledge is formed but also revealed to them the importance of "questioning, supporting and documenting ideas" (Shackelford 1992). For I agree with Shackelford (1992) that "conducting a class in this environment [both] enables students to learn the structure and arguments of the discipline [and] encourages critical insights and questions, which foster critical thinking and inquiry" and in turn make writing more meaningful and focused.

8. Conclusion

Many researchers have concluded that lectures are effective only for a small number of college students today and that active learning environments, which are reflective of the experiences and interests of students, provide a more useful education (Aerni et al. 1999). This is especially true of economics classrooms, which are most often unable to establish a connection between theory and the complex economic activity of the real world (Lewis 1995). Although the need for pedagogical innovation has been vastly recognized in the economics literature, the link between theory and practice has not been developed as a learning tool to the extent that has been done in other disciplines (Young 1991).

This essay describes the changes made in the structure of a course on gender and economics that have the potential for improving undergraduate economics education by providing opportunities for students to "be economists" in their communities. Specifically, it describes the value of incorporating exercises that send students into the field to observe and gather data that they can bring back into the classroom to analyze and integrate into their own understanding of the issues. Involving students by including their experiences and merging data collection activities into the learning process fosters "critical evaluation of personal, familial, occupational alternatives," (Strober 1987) and creative thinking. It also challenges student held stereotypes besides empowering them to reconstruct questions and seek answers beyond texts or lectures, thereby building lifelong learning attitudes and skills (Shackelford 1992). The effectiveness of the pedagogical changes and the impact they had on students are also described in this essay.

Table 1 Course Structure

Panel A: Traditional Determination of Grades, Fall 2000					
Journals	10%				
Short papers	40% (5 at 8% each)				
Exam 1	10%				
Exam 2	10%				
Research paper	20%				
Presentation	10%				
Total	100%				
Panel B: New Determination of Grades, Fall 2001					
Journals	10%				
Exam 1	15%				
Exam 2	15%				
Service learning	10%				
Course research project					
Design and development	15%				
Administration	20%				
Analysis and interpretation	15%				
Total	100%				

Table 2 Change in Student Evaluations

Question	Fall 2000 Mean	Fall 2001 Mean
The course was well planned and organized	4.348	4.500
2. The instructor made clear and understandable presentations	4.522	4.540
3. The instructor was helpful and responsive to students	4.652	4.824
4. Exams and assignments contributed to my learning	4.304	4.529
5. The instructor challenged me to think critically and independently about the subject	4.348	4.588
6. I gained an understanding of the concepts and principles in the subject area	4.304	4.588
7. I believe this instructor is an effective teacher	4.652	4.676
Overall Mean of questions 1 through 7	4.447	4.606

Appendix Household Survey

Please answer the questions by checking all the choices that apply to you or by filling in the appropriate space with your response. Thank you for taking the time to answer the survey.

5E	<u>ECTION 1: BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT</u>	<u> YOU</u>	
1.	What is your sex? Male Fe	male	
2.	What is your age?		
3.	What is the age of your spouse/partner?		
4.	What is your racial origin? White No	on-White	Other
5.	What is the racial origin of your spouse/partner?		
	White No	on-White	Other
6.	What is your marital status?		
	 Single, never married (and not cohabiting) Cohabiting Currently married Divorced or separated (and not cohabiting) Widowed (and not cohabiting) 		
7.	How many years of schooling have you completed (e.g. l	high school = 12 ye	ears)?
8.	How many years if schooling has your spouse/partner co	mpleted?	
9.	Are you currently attending school?	Yes	No
10.	O. Is your spouse/partner currently attending school?	Yes	No
11.	1. Do you have a physical or mental condition that limits yo	our ability to do day	
12.	2. Does your spouse/partner have a physical or mental household tasks?	condition that lim	its his/her ability to do day-to-day
13.	3. Do you have children?	Yes	No
If y	you answered "yes," continue to #14		
if y	you answered "no," skip to # 15		
14.	4. How many children in the following age brackets do you	have?	
	# of children 0-4 # of children 5-11 # of girls 12-18 # of boys 12-18		

15.	Do you have other adults living in your	household (e.g. pa	arents, in-la	aws, siblings et	c.)?	
		Yes	No			
16.	Do you rent or own your home?	Rent	Own			
17.	Which County/Township do you curren	itly reside in?				
	 Heart of West Michigan (Kent County and surrounding areas) Northeast Ottawa County (Coopersville/Allendale) Holland Zeeland Tri Cities (Grand Haven, Ferrysburg, Spring Lake) Muskegon County Other 					
18.	Would you characterize your household	las				
	Traditional (e.g. housework, childc Nontraditional (e.g. housework, spouse/partner)				ally between	you and your
SE	CTION 2: EMPLOYMENT INFORM	ATION ABOUT	<u>YOU</u>			
1.	Are you and your spouse/partner currently					
	0.4				g 55	. 1
	Category			You	Spouse/Par	tner
	Not employed			You	Spouse/Par	tner
	Not employed Employed part-time (less than 40 hours			You	Spouse/Par	tner
	Not employed			You	Spouse/Par	tner
2.	Not employed Employed part-time (less than 40 hours	per week) and your spouse/p		rk PER WEEI	K? (Please not	e: hours spent
2.	Employed part-time (less than 40 hours Employed full-time (40 or more hours I) How many hours on average do you working/week should indicate time spe	oer week) and your spouse/p nt on a primary ar		rk PER WEEI	K? (Please not	e: hours spent
2.	Not employed Employed part-time (less than 40 hours Employed full-time (40 or more hours) How many hours on average do you working/week should indicate time spe time spent working at home)	per week) and your spouse/p nt on a primary an	nd/or secor	rk PER WEEI	K? (Please not	e: hours spent
	Employed part-time (less than 40 hours Employed full-time (40 or more hours of the properties of the p	oer week) and your spouse/partner our spouse/partner	nd/or secor	rk PER WEEIndary job, trave	⟨Y (Please note) time to and f	e: hours spent
	Employed part-time (less than 40 hours Employed full-time (40 or more hours) How many hours on average do you working/week should indicate time spetime spent working at home) You Spouse/partner What is the annual income of you and you category	oer week) and your spouse/partner our spouse/partner	nd/or secor	rk PER WEEIndary job, trave	K? (Please not	e: hours spent
	Employed part-time (less than 40 hours Employed full-time (40 or more hours of the properties of the p	oer week) and your spouse/partner our spouse/partner	nd/or secor	rk PER WEEIndary job, trave	⟨Y (Please note) time to and f	e: hours spent
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	Employed part-time (less than 40 hours Employed full-time (40 or more hours) How many hours on average do you working/week should indicate time spetime spent working at home) You Spouse/partner What is the annual income of you and y Category Does not apply, since not employed Less than \$10,000 \$10,001 - \$15,000 \$15,001 - \$20,000 \$20,001 - \$25,000 \$25,001 - \$35,000	oer week) and your spouse/partner our spouse/partner	nd/or secor	rk PER WEEIndary job, trave	⟨Y (Please note) time to and f	e: hours spent
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	What is your spouse/partner's occupa janitor, etc.)		ur job title, e.g. re	gistered nur	se, teacher, enginee			
SE	CTION 3: TIME USE INFORMATI	ON ABOUT YOU						
1.	The following table contains a list of common household chores. Please list, on average, the number of hour you and your spouse/partner spend on each task in a TYPICAL WEEK.							
	Chores			You	Spouse/Partner			
	Preparing/cooking meals							
	Washing dishes (meal clean up)							
	Cleaning house							
	Outdoor tasks (lawn/yard work, house	ehold repair, painting, a	nimal care, etc.)					
	Shopping for groceries and other house		, ,					
	Laundry/Ironing							
	Paying bills/keeping financial records	1						
	Auto maintenance/repairs							
	Driving other household members to							
2.	What types of leisure activities do you and your spouse participate in (check all that apply)							
	Activity Watching TV/listening to radio	You	Spouse/P	artner				
	Reading							
	Volunteering							
	Relaxing							
	Sports							
	Spectator sports							
	Religion							
	Socializing							
	Talking							
	Talking							

You have completed the survey, thank you for your participation.

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