

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR IN-CLASS GROUPWORK WITH READINGS BEYOND THE TEXTBOOK

Short title for running header: In-Class Groupwork with Readings

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Abstract: The author of this article describes individual pre-class and group in-class assignments based on current news articles. Guided student pre-class readings of periodical articles can form the basis for engaging in-class group assignments. Many economics instructors seek to develop student skills at applying the concepts under study to analyze current events, but news articles can be difficult for novices because the economic content is often misconstrued by journalists and is presented along with many extraneous details. Assigning short-essay questions with the readings can help students identify the economic content while holding them accountable for the assignment. The complexity of event analysis based on news article readings makes these readings excellent material for engaging students in in-class group assignments that build on the individual student preparation.

Keywords: collaborative learning, cooperative learning, peer instruction, problem-based learning, team-based learning

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Having students read news articles on economic events before class can set the stage for engaging group tasks during class. Economic textbooks present students with real-world examples that have been boiled down to essential details. However, to develop skill at applying economic concepts to issues in the news, students need practice. Guiding student preparation with short-essay prompts can help students recognize the important economic content amid the many extraneous details in a news article. The preparatory assignment also can help students identify journalists' misconceptions or biases. The complexity of event analysis based on news articles becomes a virtue when using the articles as the basis for group assignments because the task of identifying important information in the articles provides opportunities for many students to contribute to the group effort in that way. Individual and group assignments developed from news articles comprise an important element of principles of microeconomics courses at Pacific University in Oregon and have led to self-reported gains in student ability to recognize and interpret economic issues in the news.

Individual and group assignments based on news articles have the purpose of developing student skill at applying economic concepts to decipher current news events. Numerous economic educators have identified this goal as essential for economics courses at the introductory level and beyond. Hansen's (2001, 233) third recommended proficiency identifies the student ability developed in news reading assignments and subsequent in-class activities:

Interpret existing knowledge: Explain and evaluate what economic concepts and principles are used in economic analyses published in daily newspapers and weekly news magazines. Describe how these concepts aid in understanding these analyses.

Allgood and Bayer (2017, 662) recommend that one student learning outcome for a principles microeconomics course should be that, by the end of the course, students are able to "[c]hoose

and use appropriate concepts and models to analyze and evaluate choices, outcomes, and policies in diverse settings.”

The usefulness of readings outside of the textbook for teaching introductory economics has long been recognized. Kelley (1983) describes an instructor-created supplement to textbook readings that consists of 4 to 5 news articles per week with key terms underlined and questions to guide student reading provided. The goals of the news assignments include teaching students to apply concepts to real-world problems, emphasizing the relevance of the material under study, and enlivening discussion sections led by graduate students. Case-method teaching features syntheses of news articles that students prepare beforehand and analyze in class discussions. Carlson and Schodt (1995, 24) describe the intended outcome of case-method teaching as “helping students to move beyond being ‘problem-set smart’ toward beginning to think like economists.” Marks and Rukstad (1996) point out that the complexity of cases develops in students the qualitative judgment necessary to apply theoretical principles to make economic decisions in the real world.

Having students work with their peers in class holds the promise of providing them with frequent opportunities to articulate their understanding and to receive prompt feedback that can be used to modify that understanding. These actions are important for developing student understanding and retention of concepts under study (Schwartz, Tsang, and Blair 2016). Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2014) summarize the case for using pedagogy that includes regular student-group-based in-class assignments and offer guidelines for implementing different levels of cooperative learning that range from informal, ad hoc groups in the peer-instruction technique developed by Mazur (1997) to the highly-structured permanent student teams featured in team-based learning (Michaelson, Bauman Knight, and Fink 2002).

Whatever the form of student-group instruction used, the tasks necessary to stimulate productive group interaction must challenge students and lack an obvious answer. In describing the clicker questions used in Mazur's approach, Wieman et al. (2017, 7) recommend "[a]sking more challenging conceptual questions, or questions where the answer is not obvious and critical points could be argued." Group-worthy tasks should "require complex problem solving, ... provide students with multiple entry points to the task and multiple opportunities to show intellectual competence [and] deal with discipline-based, intellectually important content," according to Lotan (2003, 72). Roberson and Franchini (2014, 295) recommend that application exercises for highly-structured team-based learning (TBL) groups should offer "concrete, specific scenarios" related to issues of significance to students. Basing group questions and tasks on news articles relevant to the concepts under study offers a straightforward way to create group questions and tasks that challenge students in a way that promotes student engagement and learning.

THE CLASS SETTING

Principles of microeconomics classes at Pacific University in Oregon consist of 54 students per semester and take place in classrooms in which students sit in groups of six. Only one or two students in the class will go on to major in economics. The vast majority of students take the class as first-year students because it is part of the requirement for a business major. A few students take the course to fulfill the quantitative reasoning requirement in the core. Perhaps ten students are taking the course because it is required for their application to pharmacy school or some other health-related graduate program; these students are usually juniors and seniors. Although women comprise more than 60 percent of the student body at Pacific University, approximately 50 percent of the students in principles of microeconomics classes at the school

are female. Students vary widely in their interest in economics and in their math skills. Students with majors in the natural sciences generally find the math in the course very easy; however, the course elicits frequent complaints from other students that it is too hard. *US News and World Report* (2021) classifies Pacific University as a selective liberal arts university; however, 87 percent of the applicants are admitted, and 25 percent of the incoming students who took the SAT scored less than 1000.

THE ASSIGNMENTS

Individual Preparation

The principles of microeconomics course at Pacific University tasks students with five short-essay assignments, each one due shortly before the last class period in each of the first five 2-week modules of the semester course. The assignments require that each student read a news article and then respond in writing to two or three prompts specific to the article in a short essay collected at the course learning management system. The prompts lead students to identify economic content in the article and to conduct basic applications of the economic frameworks under study to the issue raised in the article. Table 1 presents the essay prompts of the preparatory assignment for a *New York Times* article on a butter shortage in France (Breedon 2017) that students undertake in the supply and demand unit of the course. The questions require students to read the article and to practice on their own to identify supply and demand events in the world butter market—droughts increasing the cost of producing milk and shifting tastes in favor of buttery foods. This unit occurs early in the semester. Later assignments can pose more difficult tasks.

[Insert table 1 about here]

Together, the individual assignments count for ten percent of the grade. Student responses are graded quickly and generously by assigning 100% to a coherent essay that addresses all of the prompts, 60% to an incoherent essay or one that neglects a prompt, and 0% for missing assignments.

The essay prompts serve three purposes: holding students accountable for doing the reading, preparing students for the in-class group assignments, and alerting the instructor to important student misconceptions that can be addressed before or during the in-class assignment that is based on the same news article. (Simkins and Maier [2004] provide more detail on using “just in time teaching” exercises to prime students for class activities.) Students who fail to complete the essays before class miss the chance at the easy points but are allowed to participate in the group activity. Typically, all but one or two students complete the short essays on time.

The News Articles

The news articles are collected from the periodicals regularly read by the instructor and from Internet searches on a particular current economic issue. News articles typically describe events and present little or no overt analysis, although the economic event is always central to the article’s topic. For example, the article on butter shortages presents conditions in world markets, emphasizes the importance of butter to French cuisine, describes several distraught French citizens, and only very briefly mentions the institutional detail responsible for the shortages in France—prices are negotiated months in advance and are not easily adjusted.

On occasion, accessible and brief policy papers, journal articles, or a short case might provide examples that are descriptive in nature and thus suitable for use in an introductory class. The appendix contains a list of some of the articles that have been used for this assignment in recent semesters. In order to convey to students that the material under study is relevant for

analyzing issues in current news, not just special cases, two or three of the five articles are drawn from the news in the current semester. Prioritizing current articles does increase the work effort necessary to prepare this assignment; however, it is quite easy to maintain a long list of potentially useful articles if one reads the news daily or even weekly. It is important to select articles from multiple mainstream news sources to avoid the appearance of bias.

In-class Group Assignment

Student-group-based pedagogies differ in how student groups are formed, the nature of the output of group deliberation, how that output is reported and discussed, and how student work in groups receives credit. These details certainly matter and are discussed elsewhere.¹ The assignment discussed in this article can be adapted to a wide number of student-group-based pedagogies.

Having students read an article and answer short-essay prompts before class and then participate in an in-class group-based activity centered on that example works well for many active learning pedagogies—from informal think-pair-share clicker questions to highly-structured team-based learning application exercises. Tasks developed from news articles have several advantages over traditional end-of-chapter problems for engaging groups of students. The fact that effort is required to identify the economic content in a news article and whether the journalist’s portrayal of the economic issues is accurate or biased makes news analysis tasks more complicated and provides more opportunities for a variety of students to contribute to the task. The fact that the economic issues arise in news articles rather than in textbook examples emphasizes to students the importance of economics for understanding current events.

Table 2 presents the in-class exercise based on an article describing the French butter shortage. The group exercise took place in two separate phases; the first developed the

supporting technical analysis of events in the French butter market, and the second considered a policy recommendation. As student teams worked on the technical analysis, the instructor circulated around the room, helping any team that was stuck. It was difficult for several of the nine teams to locate the passage in the article that described the French situation in which producers and wholesalers negotiated prices months in advance and lacked a mechanism to adjust the price quickly. The instructor guided those teams to the sentence that provided the key detail and then asked them what would happen if the price could not adjust after the supply and demand events that the students had identified in their homework before the class. With that assistance, most were able to map the situation successfully and quickly.

[Insert table 2 about here]

The second part of the exercise asks students to choose the best policy response to the French butter shortage. Instructor assistance was limited to guiding students to itemize winners and losers for each policy choice and to consider both fairness and efficiency. Students often see the need for government subsidies and are skeptical of international trade, so even though option C—increase price flexibility—is obvious to advanced students, several groups recommended option B, restrict exports, or option D, subsidize the butter purchases by French stores. When teams disagree, the debriefing conversation enables a useful comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach to the policy challenge.

ASSESSING INDIVIDUAL STUDENT SKILLS

In addition to the credit for the short essays, students receive credit in the class for their engagement in group activities throughout the semester. The individual and group learning activities based on news articles serve to develop student skills that are necessary for success on

an individual project undertaken during the last weeks of the course and for the long-essay section of the final exam.

During the final module of the course, each student completes a “digital curation project” that requires the student to find a news article illustrating an economic concept studied in the course, summarize the article, conduct the appropriate economic analysis in writing in a Google document, and make a 90-second presentation to the class, supported by a single Google slide. Students receive a very detailed description of the artifacts they must produce, along with a completed sample project. Students who meet all of the specifications in the assignment description receive full credit.

A week before the final exam, students are given two possible long-essay questions, each based on a news article that has not been used as the basis of any of the five news analysis assignments in the semester. The instructor selects one of the two questions for a section of the closed-book final, which is worth 25 percent of the exam score. Student answers are evaluated based on the quality of their economic reasoning and the general coherence of their written argument.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Few comments in evaluations of the overall course mention the short-essay assignments, and the comments on the in-class group application exercises do not differentiate between the applications based on news articles and the other exercises. The instructor surveyed students in the fall 2020 online class specifically on their views toward the short-essay assignments outside of class.

Student perceptions suggest that the individual short-essay assignments mostly succeeded in helping them identify and analyze economic issues in the news. Only three of the fifty-three

students responding to the survey disagreed that the short-essay assignments helped them recognize and analyze economic issues in the news. Nine students reported not liking the assignments based on reading news articles.

Students were asked to comment on whether they thought the short-essay assignments were useful for learning economics. Fifty-one students offered comments. The positive and negative comments were distributed similarly to student agreement and disagreement with the statements. Positive comments included the following:

- I found them useful to help me interact with the content in a real-life way rather than in a theoretical way.
- I really enjoy the short essay assignments; I view it as a final way to test my knowledge. Applying certain concepts to real world examples also helps me understand the concepts.
- Pretty useful, it's one of my favorite things about this class. The fact that it's not a long essay is great.
- They help with applying what we learned in the book.
- Helped me think a little deeper about subjects.
- I believe they are pretty useful because it makes my knowledge more concrete and I can use what I learned in class and apply it to real-life scenarios.

A few students did not find the short-essay assignments to be useful. Some of the negative comments follow:

- Somewhat useful, but they sometimes seem unconnected from what we are learning in class, and I would prefer to do an assignment that reinforces those ideas instead.

- They were beneficial. I would however say that if the articles we found were to be linked to the concepts we were learning in class; it would have helped us gain a little more understanding of the textbook and class discussions.

The resistance to the exercises seems to stem from the fact that some students had a difficult time recognizing the textbook concepts in the news articles as they engaged with those articles on their own before class. The assignments required students to consider economic events closely related to a topic to be studied in the following day's class rather than topics from previous classes. These negative student comments seem to indicate a preference for assignments that review material studied beforehand to assignments that lay the groundwork for an upcoming in-class exercise.

CONCLUSION

If an instructor wants students to be able to recognize and employ sound reasoning about economic issues at the center of events encountered in their home and work lives, students must practice doing so as part of their economics class. Assigning news article readings, helping students to identify the economic issues in the articles on their own, and using the articles as the basis for group assignments in class provide students the opportunity to develop and practice applying economic analysis to real-world situations. Moreover, the in-class exercises that can be developed from the news article readings before class can pose the kind of challenging questions that result in student-group discussions that lead to increased economic understanding. Most students value the opportunity to practice using the economic tools under study to gain insight into current news events.

NOTES

¹ The Summer and Fall 2014 special issue of the *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* (Cox, Richlin, and Wenzell 2014) focuses on four prominent small-group-learning pedagogies: cooperative, collaborative, problem-based, and team-based learning. *Starting Point: Teaching and Learning in Economics—Team-Based Learning* (Simkins, Maier, and Ruder 2018) provides a detailed description of TBL in economics classes and offers an extensive library of application exercises that can be used in classes taught with TBL and other student-group-based pedagogies.

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APPENDIX

Articles used in selected recent assignments

Title	Source	Date
G.M. accelerates its ambitions for electric vehicles	<i>New York Times</i>	November 19, 2020
Price gouging: a cautionary tale	<i>The Economist</i>	October 22, 2020
The pandemic has exposed the fallacy of the “ideal worker”	<i>Harvard Business Review</i>	May 11, 2020
11 American work habits other countries avoid at all costs	<i>Business Insider</i>	March 8, 2018
France, land of croissants, finds butter vanishing from shelves	<i>New York Times</i>	October 30, 2017
Why the phrase “late capitalism” is suddenly everywhere	<i>The Atlantic</i>	May 1, 2017
Another look at the surge in EpiPen costs	<i>Reuters</i>	March 27, 2017
Oregon’s hazelnut output poised for 18% drop, forecasters say	<i>The Oregonian</i>	January 9, 2017
Reducing income inequality while boosting economic growth: Can it be done?	<i>OECD report</i>	2012

TABLE 1: Student Preparation for Supply and Demand Unit Activity

Read the article “France, Land of Croissants, Finds Butter Vanishing from Shelves” (*New York Times*, October 30, 2017)

1. Consider the world butter market. (Not the market in France. We’ll consider that in class on Tuesday.) The market features many buyers, many sellers, an undifferentiated product, and good information about the product on the part of both buyers and sellers. The competitive market model (supply-demand analysis) is an appropriate tool to apply to this market. Create a document in Microsoft Word or a Google Doc. Write a few sentences to describe the market events described in the article.
 2. Add a graph to your document that maps the events you describe in part 1. There are several ways to do this on your computer. Or, you can also just leave space between the text answers for parts 1 and 3 and draw the S-D graph freehand (neatly and well!), then scan the document that includes your graph as a pdf and turn it in that way.
 3. What is your prediction about the effect of the events described in the article on the world price of butter and on the quantity of butter sold in the world market? Explain in a sentence or two.
 4. Save the document and upload it here as either an MS Word document or as a pdf file before class on Tuesday.
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TABLE 2: Group In-class Tasks for Supply and Demand Unit Activity

Phase 1

Consider the events described in the article “France, Land of Croissants, Finds Butter Vanishing from Shelves” (*New York Times*, October 30, 2017). The butter market in France behaved very differently than did butter markets in the rest of Europe. Find the information in the article that describes the different institution in France that resulted in the French market behavior.

Use a supply-demand graph on one full sheet of paper to analyze the events in France. (Label carefully and use at least two different colors to make the sequence of events clear.)

Team reporters must be prepared to explain their team’s graph to the class.

Phase 2

Your team has been tasked to advise the French Minister of the Economy and Finance about possible changes to French butter markets. Which of the following policies do you recommend?

- A. Leave the current policy in place.
- B. Restrict French butter exports.
- C. Create greater price flexibility in the French butter market.
- D. Subsidize French butter producers who sell to French stores.

Team reporters must be prepared to explain and defend their team’s reasoning.
