

Using Newspaper Articles and Documentary Films for Applications in Principles of Economics Courses

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Principles of economics courses often cover a significant amount of topics that require an entire semester. This leaves little time for active learning activities and applications. As suggested by course evaluations, one major complaint of students at the University of Nebraska was the lack of application included in the course. In response, I wanted to include a significant amount of application in the semester without giving up class time. My solution was developing a semester long series of homework assignments and a final project that addressed the issue of incorporating real world events into the classroom.

The article summaries assignments begin a couple weeks into the semester and are due every other week. There are six article summaries comprised of two pages each. Students are given one week to complete the assignment. For each set of assignment I pick a couple of articles from reputable newspapers, including the Wall Street Journal, NY Times, along with various local media sources. The articles are selected based on the topic(s) covered the previous week: supply and demand, taxes, elasticity, money and banking, etc. The set of articles usually have slightly different topics so students can choose which is of the greatest interest to them.

Once the students have chosen an article they are then required to summarize the article using the economic terms discussed in class. Students are given a sample article summary and a rubric to help prepare for the assignment. They often have troubles with the first assignment, but after receiving feedback students quickly begin to better understand the reasoning behind the task, allowing them to get more out of the work. Offering constructive and meaningful feedback is an important part of the process, enabling students to make improvements. If a student shifts a supply or demand curve the wrong direction in describing a price change, the feedback that they receive is important so they do not make the same mistake on an exam, assignment, or the final paper.

The series of article summary assignments lead up to the final project, a 10 page documentary paper where the student must apply economic concepts to four different parts of a film. Qualifying documentaries must also include ethical issues which students are required to discuss in their papers. UNL has an ethics requirement for principles of economics courses, and this paper is a solution to fulfill that requirement.

For the documentary paper assignment, students are required to choose a documentary movie from a list presented to them. A variety of films allows students to find topics that are of personal interest, resulting in a more enjoyable and engaging process. The paper is in used in lieu

of a final exam in demonstrating knowledge of the course material. Using the paper requires individual students to reach a higher order of learning and application than an exam, with the added benefit of revealing how economics may be seen in students' lives outside of school. Many become passionate about the documentary and create strong opinions about the topics. With such emotional investment, students will be more likely to retain the economic associations and implications to the event, possibly improving the occurrence of application of economic theory to other issues they may encounter in their life.

For more information see my webpage: <http://cba.unl.edu/people/lhefel/>