

**Being Aware of Health Care:  
Using Cooperative Learning to Synthesize and Communicate  
U.S. Health Care Reform Issues**

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### Using Cooperative Learning to Synthesize and Communicate

#### U.S. Health Care Reform Issues

##### Context and Background

Health care reform was a major campaign issue during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. To help students become educated participants in the ongoing discussion, the health care reform debate was integrated into my health economics course during the fall semester of 2008 at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). The course was an elective taken primarily by seniors and economics majors (39 in total). To capture the many interrelated issues involved in the topic of U.S. health care reform, a cumulative project was developed as a substantial part of the course. This project interwove cooperative and individual learning activities over a five-week period with both in- and out-of-class components.

##### Objectives

The content objective was for students to be able to understand and evaluate the various issues in Senators McCain's and Obama's health care reform proposals.

The learning objective was for students to develop their ability to research, synthesize and communicate both sides of key health care policy issues being debated.

##### Description of Innovation and Implementation Details

This project was designed using three sequential phases: individual, cooperative group, and then individual again. The class was divided into groups of four or five and each was assigned a health care reform issue being debated during the presidential election. Each group was assigned one of the following health care reform debate issues: pre-existing conditions, portability, insurance mandates, public health care programs, tax credits and subsidies, medical malpractice jury awards, electronic medical records, government-sponsored insurance pools, and pharmaceuticals. Student groups were created using information about students' political affiliation, revealed on an earlier pretest. This was to ensure political heterogeneity within each group so issues would be discussed from all viewpoints during the project.

The first phase of the project required students to work individually for one week to complete a worksheet compiling information about their assigned issue. This worksheet included sections for key background information, illustrating examples, and summaries of how Senators McCain's and Obama's proposed policies addressed the issue. This initial writing assignment ensured that each student was prepared with adequate background knowledge before participating in the second, cooperative, phase of the project.

The round table exercise in the cooperative phase of the project was conducted during a fifty-minute class period devoted to in-class group work. In addition to completing the fact-gathering worksheet, each group member was required to bring at least two resources to class

to share with the other group members. Students met in small groups using a round table format to discuss, synthesize and compromise until they had generated a group version of their individually drafted worksheets. Specifically, the round table format required group members to begin by sequentially sharing research contained in the background information section of the worksheet. The groups then evaluated and synthesized the responses and referred to their additional shared resources to resolve inconsistencies until a consensus was reached. This process was repeated for the remaining examples and policy sections of the worksheet with each group member serving as leader for one section.<sup>1</sup> While the groups were working, I circled the room to assess each group's level of activity. When the students were actively involved in the round table process, I simply made my presence known in case there were any questions. If the process seemed stalled or the discussion was off task, I reiterated how the round table format should be conducted and prompted the students to engage in the relevant discussion.

At the end of the class period each group submitted a single group worksheet, which I reviewed and provided groups with feedback the following class that identified elements for improvement or elaboration. Groups then had one week to work together outside of class to further develop their responses and to create an associated ten-minute oral presentation. Group members were assigned at random to present information associated with each worksheet section.<sup>2</sup> Since students did not know in advance which section they would present and the group's grade was based on the presentation as a whole, each group member had an incentive to ensure that all members fully understood material associated with every worksheet section.

The final, individual, project phase provided students the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of learning and content objectives through a comprehensive paper. The unique aspect of this project phase was that students were required to synthesize and evaluate information presented by all groups. Students were asked to put themselves in the role of a third party presidential candidate and to discuss their position on each health care reform issue presented by groups in phase two of the project. Given that students were required to write about all issues presented but had only researched one issue intensely, they had to rely heavily on information presented by other groups. This project design helped students understand the importance of creating effective presentations and of paying close attention to peer presentations. Students also were motivated to ask clarifying questions after each group's presentation.

Student performance was assessed on the individual worksheet, group worksheet, oral presentation, and final paper. Allocation of the 100 project points reflected the cumulative nature and increasing expected quality of the students' work: individual worksheet (10 points), group worksheet (20 points), oral presentation (20 points), and final paper (50 points). As an

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<sup>1</sup> Groups with five members were instructed to choose one section from the worksheet to break into two parts so there were five sections to discuss.

<sup>2</sup> Groups of five members were instructed to break one section of the presentation into two parts so that there were five sections in the group presentation.

additional mode of assessment, pre- and posttests measured changes in students' knowledge of the health care reform issues and interest level. Although this was optional and did not count toward the students' course grades, every student in the class completed both the pre- and posttests. Results provide evidence of the positive impact on student outcomes. The class mean score for the content portion of the tests increased significantly, from 64% to 86%. Students were also asked to rate their knowledge about health care reform issues being debated in the presidential campaign as none, fair, good and excellent. Approximately 15% of students ranked their knowledge as good or excellent prior to the project, while this rose to approximately 82% on the posttest. Further, 90% of students in the class responded that their interest in health care reform policy increased as a result of the project.<sup>3</sup>

Written feedback from students helps illustrate benefits from the student perspective. Students felt they had learned a great deal about issues involved in health care reform, and were pleasantly surprised at how much they learned from their classmates. Students wrote that the project was a way to "learn more and retain it instead of only memorizing for a test" and that "the project helped me make an informed decision on who [sic] to vote for." In terms of project design, one student noted that "worksheets helped me organize my thoughts" and another stated that "every portion was a step towards understanding more about the topics." Further, one student commented that the most beneficial aspect of the project was that he "learned new relevant information from fellow students" which for him was "something new." This last comment especially highlights the value of cooperative learning.

All handouts, worksheets, and grading rubrics used for this project will become available on the Starting Point: Teaching and Learning Economics website. The link for this website is: <http://serc.carleton.edu/econ/index.html>. These materials can be edited and used as a guide for structuring the project for your own class.

### Teaching Notes and Lessons Learned

Although this project was designed within the context of the 2008 U.S. presidential election and health care reform, it is flexible enough to implement in a wide range of contexts. For example, this project design could be implemented in an economics of education course in which groups could discuss the use of vouchers, charter schools, teacher pay and incentives, or effects of increased funding on student performance. Alternatively, consider a law and economics course where each student group is assigned a case, and presentations focus on background facts, results or final ruling, and the economic reasoning used in the case. Generally speaking, any topic with multi-faceted issues would lend itself well to this project design.

Additionally, this project could be modified to accommodate a wide range of class sizes. The most straightforward adaptation would be to expand or contract the number of groups (and

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<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of the pre- and posttest results, the reader is directed to the working paper entitled "Cooperative Learning in a Health Economics Course: 2008 U.S. Presidential Campaign and Health Care Reform," which will be available on the University of Illinois at Chicago Center for Economic Education website (<http://cee.econ.uic.edu/workingpapers.html>) in spring 2010.

thus issues covered). Alternatively, the number of worksheet sections (and resulting length of each presentation) could be expanded or contracted. Regardless, to uphold underlying mechanics of this project, the number of groups must match the number of issues assigned for analysis. Also, group size must match the number of sections in worksheets (and thus the number of sections in subsequent oral presentations).

This project was conducted over a five-week period, with roughly one week for independent research, one week for group research and presentation preparation, one week for in-class presentations, and two weeks for writing final individual papers. The time frame for this project is flexible and can easily be altered to allow for increased time within or between any project phases. When determining project deadlines it is important to consider the complexity of the topic being researched and logistical considerations faced by your students. Since U.S. health care reform is a complicated topic and many UIC students commute rather than live on campus, the time frame used for this iteration of the project may have been too condensed. For example, since meeting outside of class is more difficult to arrange among students who commute, allocation of more than one week to prepare for group presentations would likely have been helpful. Further, due to the intricate nature of issues researched, groups may have benefited from more in-class time working on group worksheets in the round table exercise.

Because much of the final paper depends on oral presentations of other groups, this aspect of the project would be enhanced by adding a “group check-in” with the instructor during the project phase when group members are working together outside of class to prepare presentations. Arranging a short group meeting would allow the instructor to assess how well group members were working together and help mediate or redirect the group if necessary. For example, one of nine groups performed poorly in the oral presentation during this health care reform project. It was apparent that group members did not communicate clearly and that they tried to minimize preparation time by dividing the work without any group feedback or collaboration. This group’s attempt to ignore the cooperative nature of the project ultimately inhibited performance. A “group check-in” would have revealed these challenges and provided the opportunity to assist the group in developing a plan for working together to produce a more effective oral presentation.

To summarize, this project provided a unique learning experience where students shared the burden of research, learned how to synthesize complicated issues within a small group, became experts on a particular issue, and developed their ability to communicate this information to their peers. As a capstone for this project, students used their newly acquired knowledge to individually evaluate and effectively defend their chosen positions for each of the U.S. health care reform issues included in the project.