

# **Laying the Groundwork for In-Class Groupwork with Readings Beyond the Textbook**

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## Introduction

Guided student pre-class readings of periodical articles on economic phenomena can form the basis for engaging in-class group assignments. Many economics instructors seek to develop student skill 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 nearly always presented along with many extraneous details. Assigning short essay questions with the readings can both hold students accountable for doing the reading and help students identify the economic content and begin to analyze the events described. 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. 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 perceived gains in student ability to recognize and interpret economic issues in the news.

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 4-5 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 analyse in class discussions. Carlson and Schodt (1995) 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 and Johnson (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, Weiman et al. (2017) 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). Roberson and Franchini (2014) 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 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) 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) recommend that one course student learning outcome for a principles microeconomics course should be that by the end of the course students should be able to “[c]hoose and use appropriate concepts and models to analyse and evaluate choices, outcomes, and policies in diverse settings.”

## **The assignments**

### *The class*

Principles of microeconomics classes at Pacific University in Oregon consist of 54 students per semester and usually take place in classrooms in which students sit in nine 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. Though women comprise more than sixty percent of the student body at Pacific University,

slightly fewer than fifty percent of the students in principles of microeconomics classes are female. Students vary widely in their interest in economics and in their math skill. Students with majors in the natural sciences generally find the math in the course very easy; however, the course elicits frequent complaints that it is too hard from other students.

### *Individual preparation*

The assignment in use at Pacific University principles of microeconomics courses tasks students with five short essay assignments, each one due before the last class period of five of the six 2-week modules of the semester course. The assignments require that each student read a news article and then respond in writing to short essay prompts (described as just-in-time teaching questions in Simkins and Maier 2004) in a short essay collected at the course learning management system. The prompts lead students to identify the economic content in the article and to conduct basic applications of the economic frameworks under study to the issue raised in the article. Together, the individual assignments count for ten percent of the grade. Student responses are graded quickly and generously by using a simple rubric that assigns a coherent essay that addresses all of the prompts 100%, an incoherent essay or one that neglects a prompt 60%, and zero 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. The prompts always draw student attention to details in the news article that relate to the content of the unit under study and sometimes require students to conduct some basic technical analysis.

### *The news articles*

The news articles that form the basis of this assignment are collected from the periodicals read regularly by the instructor and from internet searches on a particular current economic issue. The news article used in the assignment describe events and present little or no overt analysis, though the economic event is always central to the article's topic. On occasion, accessible and brief policy papers, journal articles, or a short case might form the basis for the assignment. 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; the essay prompts take little time to compose or modify. It is quite easy to find suitable material with a quick internet search using keywords from the unit of the course under study. It is important to select articles from multiple mainstream news sources to avoid the appearance of bias.

### *In-class group assignment*

The general approach of having students read an article and answer short essay prompts before class and then participate in a group-based activity based on that case in class lends itself well to group activities of many different formats and varying degrees of complexity – from clicker questions to 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 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 the issue.

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 group receives credit. These details certainly matter and are discussed elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> The assignment discussed in this paper can be adapted to a wide number of student-group based pedagogies.

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Table 1: Supply and demand unit assignment.

*Individual preparation*

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 2 and draw the S-D graph freehand (neatly and well!), then scan the document 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.

*In-class assignment*

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.

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<sup>1</sup> The summer and fall 2014 special issue of the *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* (Cox 2014) focuses on four prominent small-group-learning pedagogies: cooperative, collaborative, problem-based, and team-based learning. Simkins, Maier, and Ruder (2018) provides a detailed description TBL in economics classes and offers an extensive library of application exercises that can be used in classe taught with TBL and other student-group based pedagogies.

Table 1 presents both the individual preparatory assignment and the two-part in-class application exercise that followed in a recent semester. The article describes a number of market events, all of them either increases in demand or increases in producer costs. In France, butter producers and distributors negotiate price once or twice a year and prices remain quite rigid between negotiations. Much of the article describes the shortage of butter in France but the institutional detail is described only very briefly. Students have to read the article before class to identify the several of events described in the article that must be mapped in their supply-demand graphs of the world market before class.

In class, this group exercise took place in two separate phases, the first developed the supporting technical analysis and the second considered a policy recommendation. As student teams worked on the technical analysis, the instructor circulated around the room, helping struggling teams. It was difficult for many of the nine teams to locate the passage in the article that described the French institutional peculiarity that led to the shortages there and to recognize that the institutional oddity amounted to a temporary price ceiling. Once they found that detail, most were able to map the situation successfully and quickly.

The second part of the exercise required that the instructor assisting groups took care not to give the answer away. 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 gravitate toward government subsidies as remedies so even though option C – increase price flexibility – is obvious to advanced students, this exercise did elicit a diversity of team responses in the introductory course, which led to a more lively debriefing conversation and a useful comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach to the policy challenge.



**Assessing student learning outcomes**

The assessment of individual student mastery of the skills targeted by the assignments based on news articles takes place during the final module of the semester and on 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 and 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. A more detailed rubric is used to evaluate these projects but earnest and mostly correct efforts receive full credit and grading is accomplished quickly.

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 two questions for a section of the closed-book final that is worth twenty-five percent of the exam score. Student answers are evaluated based on the quality of their economic reasoning and general coherence of their written argument.

**Student feedback on news article assignments**

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. Because so many of the group application exercises focus on current events, it was not possible to ask students to weigh in on the

group activities that were based on the news articles that students prepared before class.

Table 2 presents the questions asked of students and the distribution of responses.

| Table 2: Student perceptions of individual news article assignments  |                   |          |         |       |                |
|--|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| Statement  | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
| The short essay assignments helped me recognize economic issues in the news.   | 0                 | 3        | 8       | 33    | 9              |
| Doing the short essay assignments increased my ability to analyze the economic issues in news articles.                  | 0                 | 3        | 12      | 30    | 8              |
| I enjoyed applying my economic knowledge to analyze the economic issues in news articles in the short essay assignments. | 0                 | 9        | 13      | 24    | 8              |
| n = 53   |                   |          |         |       |                |

Student perceptions suggest that the individual short-essay assignments mostly succeeded in helping them identify and analyze economic issues in the news. Forty-two of the fifty-three students responding to the survey agreed that the short essay assignments helped them recognize economic issues in the news. Thirty-eight students agreed that the assignments increased their ability to analyze economic issues in the news. The fact that 9 students reported not liking the assignments based on reading news articles likely results from student perception that the workload in the course is too high. In particular, course evaluations cite the textbook readings for which students are held accountable through quizzes at the beginning of each module as quite burdensome. Even though the news article assignments never occur during the same week as the textbook readings, I suspect that the dissatisfaction expressed with the news article assignments stems from a general sense that there is too much work required in this introductory course.

Students were asked to comment on whether they thought the short essay assignments were useful for learning economics. 51 students offered comments. The positive and negative comments were distributed similarly to student agreement and disagreement with the statements in table 2. 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.

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

Somewhat useful but not really since we didn't go over them a lot in class.

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 those articles on their own before class. The assignments generally did require students to consider economic events closely related to a topic to be considered in the next day's class rather than to topics in previous classes.

## **Conclusion**

If we want 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, we must give them practice doing so. 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 provides 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.

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## Appendix: Articles used in selected recent assignments.

| <b>Title</b>   | <b>Source</b>                  | <b>Date</b>       |
|--|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| G.M. accelerates its ambitions for electric vehicles                       | <i>The 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     |
| 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              |