

Pop Culture as Pedagogy: Using Music to Improve Student Engagement, Humanize Economic Experiences, and Enhance Economic Literacy

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Abstract

In our previous work, *Springsteen-omics: contemplative pedagogy and Springsteen in undergraduate economics courses* (Journal of Economic Education, 2022), we demonstrated how deep listening of Bruce Springsteen songs enhanced student experiences with economics in a first-year seminar course. We build on this strategy to include deep listening of music that incorporates economic themes from multiple genres such as pop, hip hop, heavy metal, and R&B in additional courses including an introductory economics elective and an interdisciplinary arts course. We find that this pedagogical approach yields at least three benefits. First, it resonates with introductory economics students as we are able to “meet them where they are.” Second, these listen-and-respond activities enhance opportunities for students’ in-class engagement, which supports both their own learning as well as peer-to-peer learning. Third, because many songs use character narratives to tell stories, the strategy humanizes essential economic content and concepts in a powerful way for students. We suspect these elements together serve to enhance economic literacy as evidenced in student responses to a series of qualitative assessments.

Economic Themes Identified in Student Reflections



Deep Listening Pedagogy

1. Listen to the song.
2. Think about then describe what you heard in the song.
3. Read the lyrics to the song.
4. Listen to the song again, this time with the lyrics.
5. Reflect on the song and its content.
6. Compare the first and second listen of the song.
What changed for you?
7. Summarize take-aways. How did the activity relate to course content?

Springsteen (“The Promised Land”) : I've done my best to live the right way / I get up every morning and go to work each day / But your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold / Sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode

Student: “Springsteen mentions a great deal of significant “small town” imagery that captures a common American narrative, which many can relate to. How it is very difficult to escape poverty when there is no generational wealth or connection... Working class Americans are being crushed by the wheel they turn, and this has been a common theme throughout the music we have studied in this course.”

Springsteen (“The River”) : Lately there ain't been much work / on account of the economy

Student: “Springsteen also talks about the economy and how it can affect someone's ability to move economic statuses. If the economy is in a recession, people working blue collar jobs suffer the most. By telling this story, Springsteen is able to convey the myth of the American Dream.”

Springsteen (“The Ghost of Tom Joad”) : You got a one-way ticket to the promised land / You got a hole in your belly and a gun in your hand / Sleeping on a pillow of solid rock / Bathing in the city's aqueduct

Student: “Tom represented the pain and sadness in the eyes of those who struggle in this country while trying to find their American Dream or promised land.”

Economic Themes Present in Popular Music
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Artist	Song Title	Class	Economic Mobility	Poverty	Racial Economic Inequality	Capitalism	Unemployment / Migration	Gender Disparities
Rinôçérôse	Ju\$	★	★	★	★	★		
Willie Jones	American Dream	★	★	★	★			
Michael Kiwanuka	Black Man In A White Man's World	★	★	★	★			
Janelle Monáe	Americans	★	★		★	★	★	★
Tyler Childers	Coal	★	★	★		★	★	
Margo Price	Pay Gap	★	★	★		★		★
City High	What Would You Do?	★	★	★	★	★		★
Bruce Springsteen	Ghost of Tom Joad	★	★	★	★		★	
Cage The Elephant	Ain't No Rest For the Wicked	★	★	★		★		★
Tracy Chapman	Fast Car	★	★	★		★	★	
Bruce Hornsby	That's Just The Way It Is	★	★	★	★		★	
Grandmaster Flash	The Message	★	★	★	★	★		★
Bruce Springsteen	The River	★	★	★			★	
Dolly Parton	9 to 5	★	★			★		★
Credence Clearwater	Fortunate Son	★	★	★		★	★	
Nina Simone	Mississippi Goddam	★	★		★			★
Marvin Gaye	Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)	★	★	★	★	★		

Benefits

Accessibility

- Resonates with introductory economics students as we “meet them where they are.” We use material students frequently encounter and can easily access and connect it to course material.

Enhances Economic Literacy

- Learning economic concepts in context helps uncover nuance which aids student understanding of difficult material.

Supports Student Engagement

- Listen-and-respond activities enhance and diversify opportunities for in-class engagement, which supports both their own learning as well as peer-to-peer learning.

Humanizes Essential Economic Content

- Because many songs use character narratives to tell stories, the strategy humanizes essential economic content and concepts in a powerful way for students.

Resonates with Student Desire to Understand How Things Fit Together

- Amplifies the value of including qualitative data, personal narratives, and experiences as essential elements for fully understanding economic phenomena.
- Promotes connection-building and systems thinking, such as understanding the microeconomic impacts of macroeconomic phenomena.

Promotes Additional Skill Development

- Mindful engagement, such as sitting with content before reacting.
- Empathy-building with song characters and classmates who have different song interpretations or reactions.