

Engaging Students through Discussions in online courses

Mariya Burdina, Ph.D. University of Central Oklahoma

Alpna Bhatia, Ph.D. University of Colorado at Boulder

Introduction

This paper describes a practical strategy for using discussion boards to engage students in online economic courses. We present several examples of discussions which Insights from a piloting of the technique are discussed, including student perceptions.

Engagement in Online courses

1. Variety of learning activities

- Students have different learning styles and using the variety of learning activities could help to engage those that learn better in non-traditional lecture-style setting

2. Knowledge application

- Connecting previous experiences with newly obtained knowledge
- Retention of newly learned material
- Increased interest and motivation

3. Collaboration activities

- Shared experiences
- Sense of community and peer interaction

Elements of engaging online discussions

1. Clear Communication and Expectations

- Communicate guidelines, participation, expectations, and relevance. Students should understand the purpose of the discussion in enhancing learning.

2. Multimedia Content

- Incorporating multimedia elements such as videos, infographics, podcasts, or interactive presentations to spark interest. These resources can act as conversation starters and engage students with different learning preferences.

3. Prompt design

- Craft thought-provoking and open-ended discussion prompts. Avoid questions with simple "yes" or "no" answers; instead, create inquiries that encourage critical thinking, analysis, and diverse perspectives. Encourage students to apply concepts to real-life scenarios.

4. Peer Engagement and Collaboration

- Encourage peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration on assignments or discussions, fostering a sense of community and shared learning.

5. Instructor's presence

- Provide timely feedback on student contributions to discussions. Acknowledge and highlight valuable points to encourage further participation. This helps motivate students and shows that their input is valued.
- Actively participate in discussions to guide and facilitate. Offer insights, ask probing questions, and provide clarifications to keep the discussion on track.



Unemployment Rate Discussion

Why this works?

- Additional learning opportunities.
- Addressing misconceptions, relating new knowledge to previous personal experiences.
- Learning by teaching.
- Students relate to each other by comparing misconceptions as well as their teaching experience.
- Bonus! students experience what it is like to be a teacher and about 95% of them state that it's not as easy as it seems to explain what economics is about (bonus appreciation points for the instructors!!!)

Discussion assignment

Unemployment misconceptions: all those without the jobs count as unemployed, unemployment rate is based on number of jobless claims per month, unemployment rate should be at 0%, unemployment rate shows % of US population without the jobs.

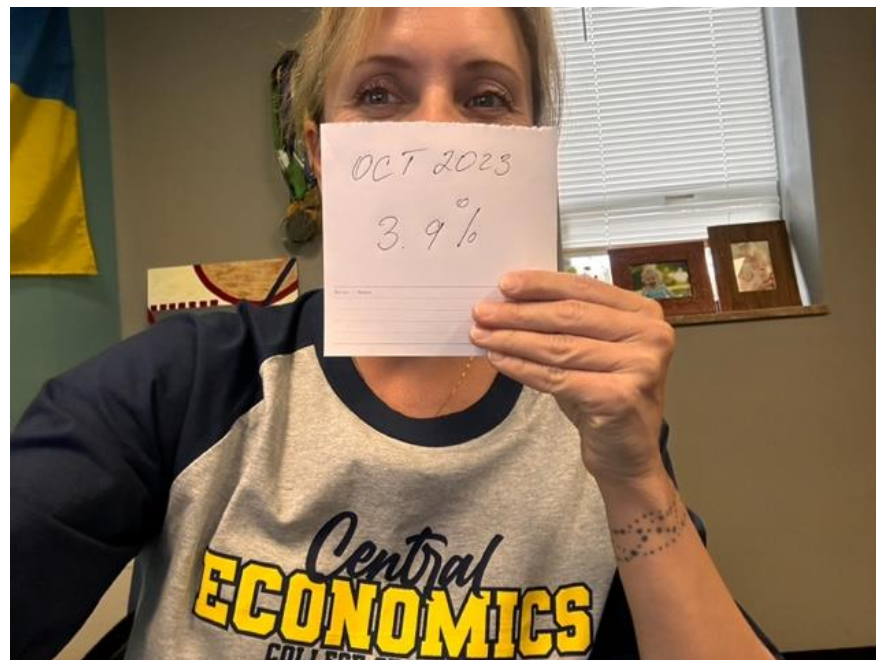
Step 1: Read the lecture, take notes, watch associated videos

Step 2: Tell us about any misconceptions about the unemployment rate that you had before learning about unemployment in this module. If you didn't have any, then please share how and where you learned about it!

Step 3: Time to talk to your friends and family.

- How do you think we calculate unemployment rate?
- What is the current unemployment rate?
- Take a piece of paper (a big one, see example below), write most current unemployment rate % on it. Show it to your dear friend or dear family member.
- Is unemployment is currently high? Low? just right?
- What do you think unemployment rate should be?
- What do you think we should do now about our unemployment situation?

BONUS!



Step 4: Correct the misconception! Tell us about your experience, tell us what you had to explain, how you did it, how did you feel about providing explanations? What have you learned from this exercise? Want to be a professor yet?

Step 5: Comment on a post of one of your classmates. Compliment them on the job well done, discuss similarities and differences between the responses you received and they received. Discuss similarities and/or differences between your explanations.

Debt and Public Policy Discussion

Why this works?

- Students learn about the structure of public, private, and national debt in an interactive way.
- Fiscal ship allows students to examine various policy and learn that each policy comes with a cost (something that many don't understand prior to taking the course)



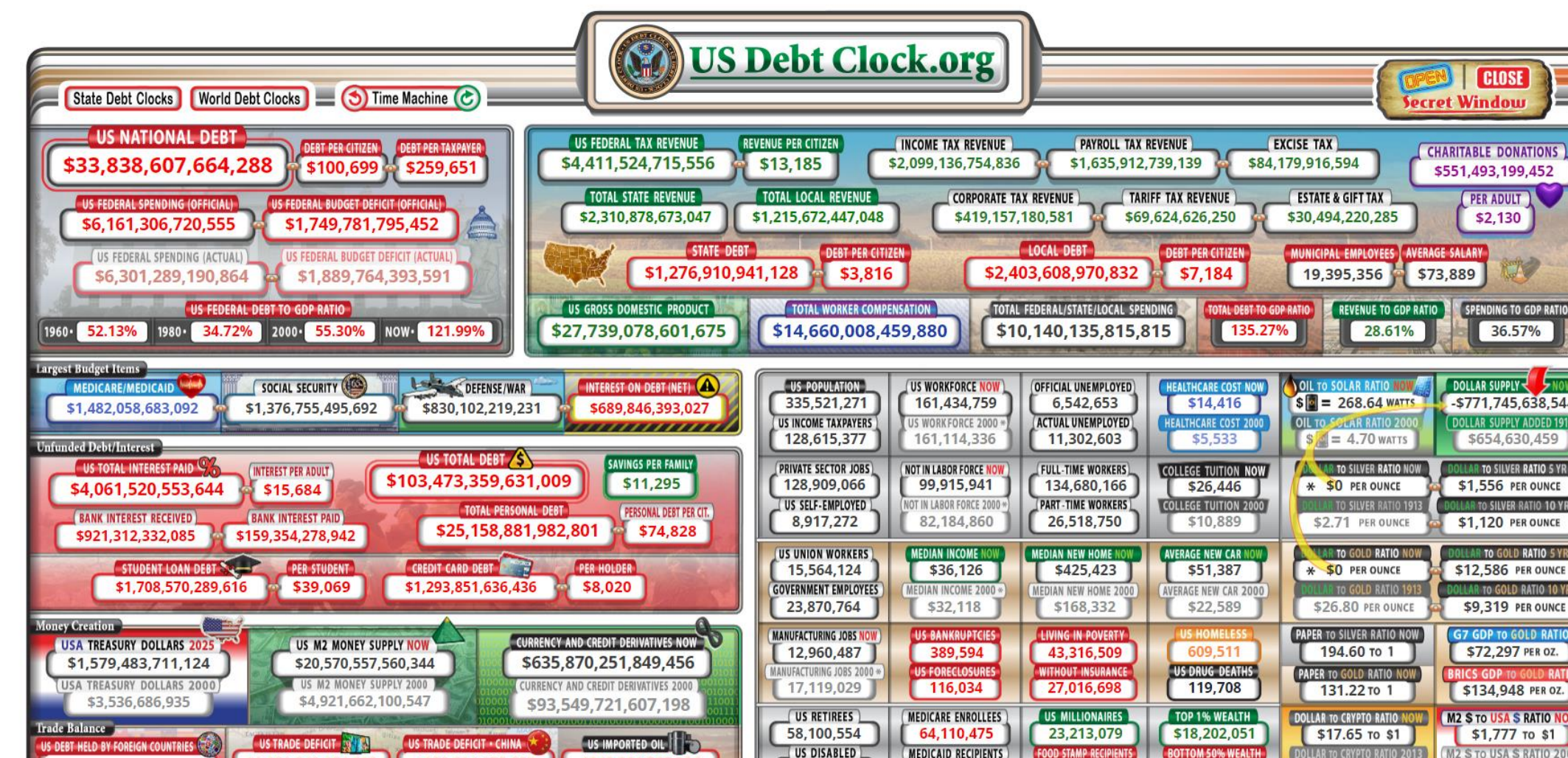
- Fiscal ship allows students to see how national debt is affected from some of the policies, and that allows to clear misconceptions about costs/benefits of various government actions.
- Addressing misconceptions, relating new knowledge to previous personal experiences.
- Students relate to each other through having similar beliefs and choosing similar policies.
- Students also learn to argue with each other in a professional way without having to rely on normative statements.

Discussion assignment

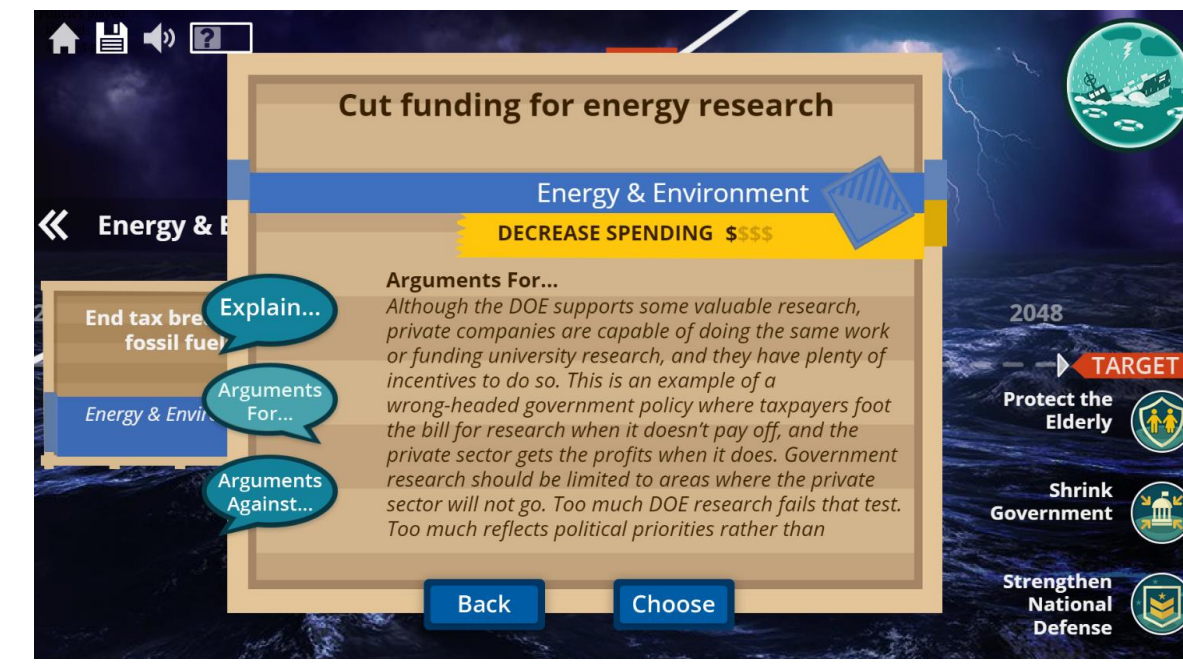
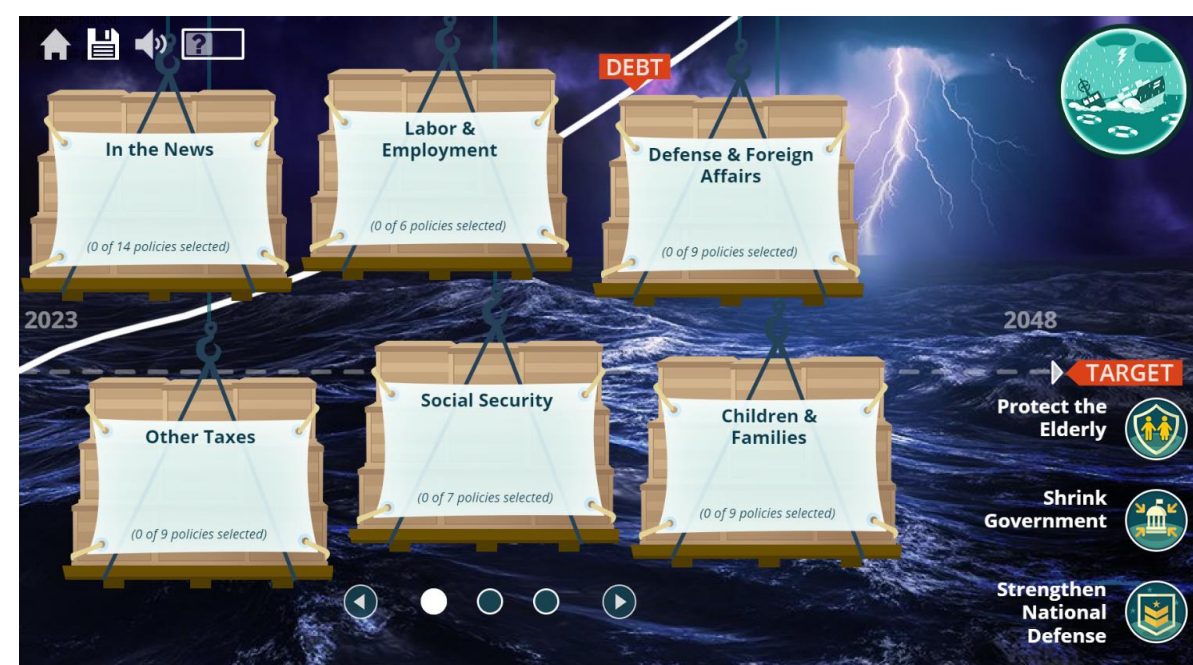
Introduction: Discussion of deficit, debt, and elements of public policy.

Step 1: Check the [US Debt Clock](#)

and pick two debt measures that you were surprised about the most. Describe these measures (if you point the mouse to each measure, you'll see the description). Discuss what made you interested in these measures.



Step 2: Description of the game. Step by step instruction on how to play and what to achieve.



Step 3: Discuss!!! Here are the questions to discuss:

- Describe the goals you selected for yourself and the policies that you chose to achieve your goals and to reduce national debt.
- What stood out to you as having an especially large impact on the budget, and what stood out as having a smaller impact. Was there anything about this that surprised you?
- Were you able to achieve your governing goals AND balance the budget.
- What tough choices did you have to make and where did you have to compromise?
- Were there policies you wish you could have played, but couldn't because the effect on the budget was just too large? Were there policies you played that you wished you didn't have to use?

Step 4: Comment on one of the posts of your peers. Discuss the effect of the policies they selected, discuss your support or opposition of the policies and explain the reasons for your support or opposition. Saying 'good job' is not considered a meaningful discussion.