

#TeachECONference2020 Developing Student Skills -

Summary of main Q&As

In this document we summarise the three presentations delivered in this session and the discussion around the topic that arose in the Zoom and YouTube chat. The three presenters have jointly contributed to this write-up which we hope is useful to those who attended and those who are picking up the ideas at a later date.

Employability skills in Economics Degrees by Dr Cloda Jenkins (UCL and CTaLE)

In this session Cloda presented research undertaken with [the Economics Network](#) in 2019 on how UK economics departments are embedding skills development in undergraduate degrees. She discussed the fact that there although economics departments are doing a lot in this area, gaps remain between what they are prioritising and what employers are experiencing with recent graduates. A number of potential reasons for this gap were discussed including the fact that the academic definition of some skill areas, such as communication and application of economics to the real world, was different to what was needed for the workplace. Departments also found it challenging to get staff and students to engage with skills-focused activities and assessments. Potential solutions to improving the situation were presented, including moving to more 'learning by doing' and active teaching strategies, designing assessments closer to what economists do in the workplace and incentivising staff and students to engage. A number of interesting comments and questions arose in the chat on Zoom and YouTube.

Does writing a senior thesis help with skill development?

It was noted in the chat that students learn a lot of these kinds of skills through a big integrative project but that it might be better if senior thesis/dissertation was not just academic, so relevant to most people's careers. One option could be data analysis projects that are "authentic".

It was also noted that those who select into an optional thesis are not the ones whose skill development we are worried about. Finding ways to engage all students with the importance of skill development is important.

Another idea presented was to have students present a "pitch" about their thesis. This should be able to be 30 seconds, 5 minutes, or a more standard 15-minute poster

presentation. One instructor who did this, did not make it part of formal assessment, but it was helpful. Others liked the idea of an elevator pitch on the project and it was noted that they will be asked to do this in interviews/assessment centres. Telling them the relevance for interviews and work might encourage them to take it seriously even if not assessed. Another comment was made that elevator pitches make a great way to end a course on a fun note.

Cloda noted that dissertation/senior project was one of the main things that UK departments said they used to develop skills but employers emphasised three things in focus group discussions about the value of the final year projects.

- Lots of students could not explain what they did in their project or why when asked so they did not have an intuitive understanding of their research.
- It tends to be academic writing and some data analysis so of limited relevance to work-placed research.
- When students apply for jobs they have not done the project yet and it should not be the only example they have to talk about.

Feedback from students is that they want to have the skills to do the dissertation by the time they get to Senior/Final year rather than being thrown into it at the end. So building up the skills through the years is important so they are confident with the 'big stakes' project.

What kind of applied activities can be run online?

Chat noted that lots of in-class “applied” activities to try on the [Starting Point: Economics site](#). Cloda is still working through how to move activities online but finds that students are willing and able to engage with each other in group work online and many other activities she runs, like case study projects, happened away from the classroom in any case and were already on platforms like wikis and blogs. Doing live presentations virtually is going to be good practice for students as more virtual meetings and seminars are likely to become the new normal. The Economics Network Virtual Symposium 2020 provides resources and ideas around how to run [data analysis](#) activities and [use Excel in teaching](#) online.

Is there value in students working together?

Chat discussion noted that team-based learning and other collaborative learning pedagogy are very effective at developing soft as well as hard skills. Cloda is a big believer in group work, both small stakes group discussions in class and assessed projects. This reflects the fact that in her prior careers in consultancy and government

everything was done in a team and there is a lot of learning to be done about how to work effectively with others, particularly the strong-willed and the free riders. More ideas on [Group Work in Economics](#) can be found on the CTaLE website.

What skills are employers looking for?

Cloda's presentation identified Communication with non-expert audience (oral and written), ability to use economic theory and empirical evidence to solve real world problems (not seen before) and ability to work with others as key skills for employers. The research report also emphasises the importance of wider employability skills, particularly the ability to learn how to learn by yourself, the ability to manage multiple priorities and to be adaptable/flexible. Chat noted communication is the #1 skill that our surveys of employers in Colorado mountain communities desire. Problem solving is #2.

Oral Communication Skills in the Economics Curriculum: Presentations are not enough by Chelsea T Dowell (Kentucky Wesleyan College)

*Abstract of presentation**

Businesses want to hire new graduates, but they claim that the newest generation of graduates do not have the oral communication skills necessary to be successful. Economics courses requiring formal presentations are not doing enough to prepare students for the business world. Oral communication at a firm entails so much more than presentations. This paper offers an elegant, yet simple, original assessment method that can be combined with almost any collaborative learning activity in the economics classroom. Students' evaluations of personal and peer oral communication skills are analyzed, both before and after the new assessment method is introduced. The field experiment suggests that students believe the assessment rubric improves their colleague-to-colleague oral communication skills and gives them more confidence in their professional conversations.

*Do not replicate in part or whole without the author's written permission.

Where can I read more about the task description, experimental design and protocols of your field experiment?

This paper is still in the draft form. As such, more detailed information regarding the experimental design and protocols are available on an individual basis by request

(chelsea.dowell@kwc.edu). I would value input and feedback, but the paper is not yet ready for public distribution.

Related references can be found at

- Dowell, C. T. and D. F. Duncan. 2016. "Periscoping economics through someone else's eyes: A real world (Twitter) app." *International Review of Economics Education* 23: 34-39.
- Maier, M. H. and D. Keenan. 2008. *Economics live! Learning economics the collaborative way*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Can you say more about the task? What do students talk about? What is the prep work required? What is the dynamic of the conversation and role of instructors?

Instructors already incorporate group activities into their classrooms. For example, we use Think-Pair-Shares, debates, and other collaborative learning assignments. The wonderful thing about the proposed peer evaluation rubric is that it can be paired with any group activity an instructor is already using. Therefore, the preparation time for the instructor is minimal. After the rubrics were returned, I gave the students time to self-reflect in a class discussion. Students tended to be much more critical of themselves than their peers. Students frequently admitted that it was most difficult to maintain professional diction and tone with students they felt were their friends outside of the classroom. They also struggled with "professional, respectful silence." When one group finished early, they immediately were tempted to slip back into their traditional student role instead of maintaining a professional colleague persona.

As the instructor, my role was to explain the goals in the marking rubric goals and the assignment instructions, answer questions about the assignments as I walked around, and collect the peer evaluation rubrics when they were completed. I facilitated the group discussion after, but this discussion only lasted about five minutes. All in all, the bulk of the responsibility lies with the students and not the instructor. This is a learner-centered approach to oral communication.

Is there an argument for oral exams to incentivize students to learn to communicate clearly?

Chat noted support for this but argued that it was hard to scale up. One respondent noted that oral communication is under-researched and under-applied in

British/American world. There will be a CTaLE seminar, with Dr Fabio Arico (UEA), on successful move of viva voce assessment online on [July 8th](#). It was noted that students need to learn to communicate via zoom as much as face to face.

How do you prevent the peer evaluation from becoming a popularity poll? Or more to the point, what cues do you give to students for the peer evaluation?

The peer evaluation rubric allows students to not be perfect and still receive full credit for the assignment. This helps reduce students being overly critical or overly lenient in the peer evaluation process. I also made the points low-stakes to remove some of the pressure of the grading aspect. The real value of the assignment is that students are actively thinking about what a professional response would be. The rubric outlines what professional dialogue should sound like and the peer evaluation is a commitment device to actively attempt the process. It is possible to put students in groups that they are unfamiliar with to reduce a popularity contest situation, but students found that they were actually most challenged to stay professional with peers that were also their friends. I would not want to remove that valuable learning opportunity from the activity.

Which one is a better strategy in economics presentations? Direct message in the speech or so many words but indirect message like many economists prefer?

Chelsea suggests that, as with most economists' answers, I believe the answer depends on the situation. Direct messaging can be valuable in situations where the audience will enjoy the message, but indirect messaging can be useful in situations where the audience may react less favorably. The message itself is an important determinant in which is the most persuasive method of delivery.

How do oral presentations with large groups?

Chat suggested group presentations, with random questions to individuals in the team at the end can be a way to help with scale and develop oral presentations. One person has an assessment in which students have to create a 3-min video of a given economic question for a general audience (i.e. not economists). They circulated the top 3 videos (according to the markers) amongst admin staff, and asked them to comment on the videos and choose their favourite. Students found it challenging to create a message for the general public. More information [here](#).

How can we show students what good communication looks like?

Chat noted that most economists find it hard to communicate with the wider public. We need to find ways to 'model' what we want them to do. One person noted that they and their co-authors recently worked to make their work more accessible for [a blog](#) and it was a really helpful process to go through to draft and redraft for this format. It was also noted that examples like the LSE and Voxeu blogs provide helpful examples of this kind of work. It is time consuming but educational to take the effort to do this. There are also some great examples of how not to do it to share from academic writing. You can tell students that if they find an article or book hard to read to ask themselves why - was it them or the way it was written? Would also be great to ask economists working in professional settings to comment/review the student projects but they are normally not allowed to actually assess because of quality assurance regulations. Getting employers involved may be easier to do online.

What tools are good for students creating videos?

Chat suggestion was Loom.

What do folks think about posing a meaty question that requires application to the real world in small groups and then randomly choosing a specific member of a group to report their group's consensus answer in 60 seconds? (incentive vs stress tradeoff)

One respondent noted they do that quite a lot in small group tutorials/seminars. Students produce some bullet ideas in small groups and then one person has to present what they came up with. Low stakes and they decide who presents. Respondent worried that by allowing the groups to choose the person, the shy students never get the opportunity to present.

Using Short Writing Assignments to Teach Critical Thinking in a Large Intermediate Microeconomics Course by Kripa Freitas (presenter) and Andrea Williams (University of Toronto)

Calculus-based Intermediate Microeconomics courses typically use algorithmic problems to develop and assess student understanding. While useful, these do not necessarily develop students' critical thinking skills or transfer to other courses. Consequently, students struggle to use class concepts in topic-based upper-level

courses and in open-ended real-world situations. To address this problem in a large course with multiple sections, we use short writing assignments. The session described the important elements of the task and implementation best practices.

There are a few reasons to incorporate writing assignments. Students are more likely to explain economic analysis in a job than solve algorithmic problems, so they build job skills. They also give them a chance to explore the material in-depth, independently, and critically.

To develop critical thinking, the students perform an evaluative task (e.g. make a recommendation) in an open-ended context (Brookfield 2012). To build transferability, students need to recognize abstract conceptual connections between the situation and class material, a hard task that requires explicit guidance.

To achieve the course learning objectives and perform at the level required, students need support. This could take the form of task-specific guidance, tutorials, etc. Another efficient way is to include low-stakes writing and connection opportunities throughout the course.

If you focus on narrow course concepts, grading becomes more consistent and efficient. The more specific the situation, the less likely students will copy from outside sources.

Over the years, to implement this at scale (~300 students a year), we've kept the assignments short (750 words). Multiple assignments allow for more practice opportunities and prior feedback becomes formative.

Grading using rubrics is key. Rubrics communicate expectations and focus attention on what is important (e.g. improved analysis vs. refined sentence structure). They also make giving tailored feedback efficient. Time spent designing useful rubrics saves grader time. Without them, graders have to give detailed individual feedback which in a large class could be a prohibitive cost.

Writing, while valuable, is merely a delivery mechanism for economic analysis. Focussing on task design and student support makes it a more productive learning opportunity for both instructor and student. Narrow, focused prompts, technology use and rubrics are key to implementing writing at scale.

This reference is strongly recommended: Brookfield, Stephen D. *Teaching for critical thinking: Tools and techniques to help students question their assumptions*. Jossey-Bass, 2012.

Can Kripa share a few (or more :)) examples of her writing assignments and their associated rubrics? What was the actual writing assignment that was used in the intermediate micro course?

You can find some assignments here:

<https://freitas.faculty.economics.utoronto.ca/teacheconference2020/>

When the paper is more polished I'll add it there. In the meanwhile, please feel free to reach out via email. I'm happy to talk more about these assessments or how to adapt them to your context.

How important are thinking skills and how to develop them?

In my opinion, developing critical thinking skills is crucial. Students will not remember the details of calculations in a few years (or maybe even after the final). If they can use course concepts to ask and answer open-ended questions, and critically examine real-world issues, it is more likely they have learned skills that will last (I think).

I would strongly recommend Brookfield (2012) for guidance on how to develop critical thinking skills. He defines what critical thinking means and then lays out ways to develop them. Once you have this larger framework, you can adapt it to your class/context.

Other useful ideas in general discussion

What's the best way to share chat from a zoom lesson?

Suggestions made in the chat were to move the chat to Slack or similar; allow others in Zoom meetings to save the chat themselves or share the recorded chat afterwards but get permissions for doing this from all participants. It was noted that saved chat is no longer interactive and this may be valuable if there are asynchronous activities that overlap with class activities.

What's the best hashtag for Economics Education?

#teachecon or #econteach or #TeachEcon or #EconTeach

Someone pointed out that for those using screen readers, capitalizing each word is accessibility friendly. So #TeachEcon not #teachecon or #EconTeach not #econteach.

Will going online make it easier to get employers/alumni involved?

Cloda noted that it is potentially easier to interview an employer/alumni and then have the recording available over time. Lecturers may also find that where they have guest lecturers in a course they are more easily able to attend online.

Will going online make it easier to develop communication skills?

Going online will not necessarily make it easier. We as instructors will have to be thoughtful and purposeful in creating opportunities for students to develop oral communication skills. It is much easier to type a professional response when you have time and editing capabilities. It is much more challenging to respond professionally in real time. Instructors could use Dowell's peer evaluation rubric presented in Day 1 Session 1 and require students to video conference with one another in their group activities. This will cause scheduling challenges, but those are the same challenges that we are all facing with scheduling in the real world during this crisis. It is another valuable skill to learn.

Is there a case for working with other departments to teach skills?

One comment on chat noted that they were creating "bundles" of classes that they encourage students to sign up for simultaneously in Fall quarter (minimize contact points). The bundle has a large econ writing class, an applied econ class with short weekly paper AND (the killer) the English department's writing course. The 3 will be coordinating so students can get dedicated writing help from people who know how to teach it. This idea was considered 'fantastic' in chat. It was noted that even coordinating within economics modules would be great. However, if working in 'bubbles' of students or similar on campus this may make sense in 2020/21 although lots of logistics/planning is involved. All the instructors have buy-in, which is 90% of the battle. And again, pitching it to the administrators as "these 50 students will only have classes with each other and therefore we are reducing infection AND benefiting their learning" is very helpful.

Can you assume students develop skills themselves or do you need to teach them how to do the skills along with the content?

Chat noted that you can't assume students know how to write well. Absolutely have to help them develop their skills. Cloda does all her small group teaching activities around how to explain the materials we are learning to non-experts. Writing is a hard skill. It is hard for us, so we can't assume students know how to write. Another chat contributor notes that they spend lots of the time with my dissertation students, explaining how to write, structure the introduction, etc. Support for student writing is both key and tough to get right! Another commentator said they had a peer review process, but explicit points for "reader experience". Only somewhat effective. [This paper](#) on writing for non-expert audiences was also recommended.

How encourage students to make use of feedback to improve?

Chat noted that the professor needs to explain to students the value of their feedback. One participant gets students to mark an anonymous essay from a student in a previous year and that really helps them understand what 'good looks like'. Students always give it an A and are amazed when I explain why it got a C. Learning by being the instructor is great. Others noted the general value of peer evaluation rather than self-evaluation.

If you want to get in touch with any of the speakers

Cloda Jenkins, Principal Teaching Fellow, Department of Economics, UCL:
cloda.jenkins@ucl.ac.uk; @UCLEconCareersT

Chelsea T. Dowell, Assistant Professor of Economics, Center for Business Studies,
Kentucky Wesleyan College, 3000 Frederica Street, Owensboro, KY 42303:
chelsea.dowell@kwc.edu

Kripa Freitas, University of Toronto: k.freitas@utoronto.ca