



TeachECONference2021 Session: Inspiring Ideas for Economics Education – Q&A

In this document, we summarise the discussion around the topics that arose in the Zoom Q&A and 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.

Panel

Chair: Gina Pieters (University of Chicago)

Speakers:

- Tobias Brevik (Florida State University)
- Tim Burnett (Aston University)
- Sarah Jacobson (Williams College):

1. Acquiring Actionable Student Feedback in Real Time Through Graded Questionnaires

Speaker: Tobias Brevik (Florida State University)

Q1) How often do you have students submit these ""journals"?"

A1: I generally aim for one every week or every other week. In the 6-week course the data comes from, I asked them to submit journals 4 times.

Q2) Are the journals anonymous or not?

A2: The journals were not anonymous.

Q3) Do you have any concerns about linking the journals with grades? My worry (in the UK) would be that students act instrumentally to get the ""extra credit"" - creating a bigger noise to signal ratio?

A3: My concern with linking journals with grades would be that they would be more inclined to give either positive or neutral feedback. My sense from reading journal answers is that they felt safe criticizing me and the course (some responses were definitely critical!) I



definitely want to do future work exploring how feedback changes when it's anonymous vs not though.

Q4) Is anonymous feedback preferred? Could you suggest an online platform to collect it?
We have struggled with that at UM

A4: I don't have an answer of whether it's preferred or not, and I definitely want to do future work exploring anonymous vs non-anonymous. As far as platform, I don't have a good suggestion, but what I am *personally* inclined to do is use oTree linked to Heroku to collect data, as that will save it in a spreadsheet format that I'm familiar with from using oTree to run experiments. I'm not familiar enough with other platforms to give a suggestion, but a definite downside with Heroku is that you'll have to spend some money to use it if the number of students is sufficiently large.

Q5) Do you have an idea about your rate of success in terms of "resolutions"? In other words, how many of your students felt that issues were resolved by the end of the semester.

Q5: I do not have an idea of this, but this is also something I want to do future work on! Specifically, I have an interest in seeing if anonymity or lack thereof affects how much students feel like issues are resolved.

Q6) How much of the actionable feedback led to actual action and did you take the time to individually explain why suggested actions were not warranted in some cases?

A6: I don't have a good sense of this, unfortunately. I did explain why they were not warranted at times, but this is a phenomenal suggestion and something I want to be more purposeful about moving forward.

2. Developing the Role of Data in Teaching Introductory Microeconomics

Speaker: Tim Burnett (Aston University)

Q1) Do you have any good resources you would recommend for those considering adopting a more data-centered approach?

A1: Good question.



My first recommendation is, naturally, to hold out for publications based upon my present work in which I am trying to synthesise theory, practice, and data sources. The most immediate of these publications will be a book chapter, but I anticipate further outputs. Hopefully, the work will provide some inspiration on what works well.

Beyond this, the best advice I can give to economics educators is that there isn't a 'silver bullet' and that different approaches may have varying effectiveness in different programmes or with different student cohorts—which means there is no one resource which can do the job.

The [Science Education Resource Centre](#) at Carleton explicitly addresses many of the ideas which educators take for granted around data.

I wrote a 'think-piece' on experiential learning using data for the Economics Network which can be accessed [here](#).

For more conventional lecturer-led approaches I can only recommend that educators engage with some of the theory reinforces ideas about what is being achieved (e.g. [Armento \(1987\)](#)).

For data sources, there are many. The [Economics Network has a good page](#) on data. Doing Economics, part of the CORE programme, has [good data projects](#) with data which can be plundered. Introductory Econometrics by Wooldridge has [excellent data](#). There are also a whole bunch of [data repositories](#) available online. If you can't find the data you need, you might think about simulating a dataset, which I discuss briefly in the Economics Network piece (link above).

3. Un- (or Self-) Grading: Reflections from an Upper-Level Elective

Speaker: Sarah Jacobson (Williams College)

Q1) Do you think this approach would scale to a large enrollment course like intro or intermediate level?

A1: Certainly people do ungrading in larger classes; I have not yet tried it. It would require a lighter touch and more automation than I did in this class; I met with each student for typically an hour at three points in the semester: at the start of the semester, mid-semester at the goal check-in, and at the end of the semester. That would have to be economized down to shorter or fewer meetings; perhaps peer conversations could be leveraged to fill the gap, and this would have additional pedagogical and personal development benefits for the students. These meetings were the main thing that took more time than a normal



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graded course for me, so I believe that would be the largest divergence as the course gets larger.

I think the other obvious question is, would students in a large class show the same integrity in evaluating themselves, and therefore would they work as hard and learn as much? It is an empirical question and I don't have an empirical answer. But I would like to think that the fact that they have to justify their grade will nudge them to good behaviour.

The question not asked but related is, for a course that is a core course in a major that is a prerequisite for other courses – what if the students' goals diverge from what the instructor thinks the students "should" get from the course? In this case, I'd add more structure to the student goals; I'd state some department-level learning objectives for the course and how students can achieve different levels of competence with each of them, and I'd ask them to include some level for each major department-defined learning objective – and I'd also encourage them to add any of their own as well. That list of department-defined objectives would have to be finite and not too long, of course, which I know would be a challenge for our core courses here.

Q2) What were typical "goals" that students set for themselves? Are they really in a position to set these goals? How does that work with the learning goals you have set for the course?

A2: I've already recognized that especially in electives, students will have a bit of a cafeteria approach to the course, perhaps not learning every specific element I might have specified in advance as something I hoped they could get from the course. I'm OK with that. I'd rather have them come away with appreciation for / interest in the subject matter and a strong grasp of some of the topics, rather than a weaker appreciation (from being forced to focus on *everything* at once) as well as a tepid understanding of all the topics.

Students did struggle to some extent to define goals. I provided the following instructions / examples / guidance regarding how to define them:

My best guess is that the optimal number of goals is 4-8, as long as you are setting goals of the right scale - for example, "Learn economics" is too broad, but "Learn the syntax for the ranksum command in Stata" is too narrow.

For each goal, please use this format:

- * Goal area (e.g., experimental methods, understanding of theory, envi / behavioral econ topic learning, empirical skills, professional development, organizational / management)
- * Goal (e.g., better understanding of econometric identification, grounding in basic behavioral econ concepts, skills at giving a presentation)
- * Why is this goal important to me? Where do I currently stand with regard to it?



* How will I assess my progress toward this goal?

Regarding what the goals were, most students literally took some of the example goals I gave them in the instructions I listed above. Since it was a class on environmental behavior, several had specific goals of learning more about environmental / natural resource problems and how they can be addressed. Similarly, since this is a behavior-focused class in which many of the papers we read were based on experiments, a lot of students wanted to learn how to design a good experiment or how to understand experiment design. Of course, Stata skills were popular as well. A surprising number had a goal along the lines of "I'd like to be able to explain concepts from this class to a non-economist." And many also had goals that were simply about keeping up with the work, meeting with me in office hours, and that sort of thing.

Q3) I teach at a private university that is not particularly selective. Do you think the effectiveness of your "ungrading" approach would work at an institution that does not attract many elite students?

A3: I think the root of the question is, will students with "weaker" academic preparation 1) be as able to set meaningful and achievable goals, 2) be motivated by those goals, and 3) be honest with themselves about their progress toward those goals? I don't see any reason to think that 2) and 3) have negative answers; if anything, "elite" schools may have students feeling more anxious about their precious GPA's and thus they may be more likely to give themselves slack rather than be more honest. Regarding 1), it is sensible that students who have weaker grounding in their academics may be less realistic about what's achievable; my guess is that the instructor can alleviate this by providing support in the goal-setting step.

Honestly, I think ungrading would be an even more empowering experience for students who have been told they are not elite; I suspect "elite" students are given more autonomy and freedom to pursue their independent interests, and it could be a really powerful experience for a student to feel that sense of responsibility for their own education.

Q4) What are the range of goals students write? How much of a percentage are personal goals and how much are goals related to the course material?

A4: See question Q2 re the kinds of goals I saw. Note that I encouraged them to have goals about environmental / behavioral economics topics, experimental / theoretical / empirical methodologies, and things that were more like professional development. If you consider personal goals to comprise everything from giving a good presentation to contributing to class discussion to being able to communicate with laypeople to keeping up with me in office hours and not falling behind on the readings, I'd say that was 25% of goals on average.



There was very little that I'd consider truly personal in the sense of not advancing them academically / intellectually, which I think of all of the examples I just gave as doing.

Q5) Is that ok with the university that your grade distribution is the way it is (mostly As)?

A5: Yes, for "senior seminar" level classes at Williams College (which this one was), the injunctive norm average grade (what we're told the average should be) is a little below what mine was, but the de facto norm is probably right near it. I also had one student I didn't list the grade of in my presentation because that student semi-flamed out and didn't complete the course fully, and that pulled the class GPA down further. At this point in their academic careers, the students are really focusing on areas they can excel in.

Q6) How can your approach scale to classes of 40 or more?

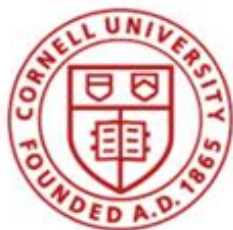
A6: See Q1 above.

Q7) Curious about how different you think the experience might be among freshmen and juniors/seniors?

A7: Similar to part of my answer in Q3 about non-elite students, I expect that students earlier in their academic career would need more support in setting goals that are realistic but challenging and in establishing practical plans about how to measure goal progress.

Q8) How could we level the playing field on self-assessment? I believe some students are much more conscientious and harsher on themselves than others. May we, as teachers, decrease that difference?

A8: This is certainly a challenge, and as we noted it may vary by a student's demographics – women may be more self-critical, or folks from historically-discriminated-against groups may have internalized some criticisms they have received / observed in their lives. I don't have a perfect answer. But my feeling is this. This is not a wholly subjective thing where we're asking students to say how smart they think they are. We are asking them to list a specific set of goals, and how they plan to measure their progress toward their goals. When we meet with them at the start of the semester, we can nudge them to modify either of those to be more realistic or to stretch further. And then at the end of the semester, they write up their assessment of that progress toward those goals – and if they are being overly minimizing of their progress, or inflating of their shortcomings, the instructor still explicitly has the option to adjust the grade. Remember that their ways of assessing their progress



should have been relatively objective measurable things, and therefore things that should let us push against bias, whether from outside the student or within.

Q9) How to set goals in a principles class (where students often don't know what Econ is)

A9: As I noted in response to Q1, especially since that's a prerequisite to other classes where we want certain things to be covered and understood, I would experiment with asking students to designate their planned level of facility with a set of learning objectives I'd determine based on what the departmental expectations for the course are. You could also suggest additional example goals that relate to learning what econ is / can do in areas of interest to them.

Remember that there's also an opportunity to refine goals in the middle of the semester!