



Teaching Innovations in Economics: Strategies and Innovations for Interactive Instruction

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Teaching Innovations in Economics is one result of a series of workshops, online training, and support for scholarly work organised by two economists prominent in the field of economic education, Michael Salemi and William Walstad. The 30 contributors to this volume were active in a National Science Foundation funded Teaching Innovations Program, either as workshop organisers or participants. The workshop programme was intended to encourage economists to investigate, adopt and disseminate new teaching techniques. The book continues this mission.

The book begins with a lengthy description of the Teaching Innovations Program, with details on its workshop curriculum, the use of an online system to maintain contact with participants as they implemented innovations in their own classes, and a description of how participants were encouraged to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning in economics. These initial chapters are probably most useful to readers who plan to develop a similar workshop programme. The later chapters have two natural audiences: teachers of economics and economists interested in initiating research on teaching pedagogy.

The core of the book focuses on innovative teaching methods that could be incorporated into economics courses: cooperative learning, experiments, discussion, formative assessment, context-rich problems, cases and interaction for large classes. Each technique is introduced by a workshop organiser. Three instructors then provide descriptions of how they employed the technique in their courses. The examples are drawn from a variety of undergraduate classes, including principles of economics, intermediate theory and field courses, and a variety of types of learning environments such as liberal arts colleges, large universities, community colleges and distance learning courses. A number of the examples could be directly implemented by many instructors, but the book's main emphasis is broader. More than a manual of specific activities and exercises, this volume provides an agenda for developing innovative methods by any teaching economist.

Not all chapters accomplish this goal equally well. For example, the chapters on cooperative learning and context-rich problems provide particularly clear motivation for using those methods, with many examples of the techniques, and then present novel applications by the workshop alumni. On the other hand, the chapter on experiments merely asserts the value of using experiments and then focuses on the experience of the instructors in adapting existing experiments to their own classes. All the teaching methods chapters provide cases of successful use of innovations in economics classes but some chapters provide more detailed descriptions so that the reader can create new applications of these teaching methods. For example, the chapter on 'Case Use in Economics Instruction' starts by defining

the case method and identifying five characteristics of a 'star-quality' case. It then discusses how cases can encourage higher order learning in economics. The chapter describes, in detail, four cases in which students are asked to make a decision based on their analysis of information provided. These range from a relatively simple case where a hypothetical student needs to choose between a cash payment and a valuable baseball card, to a more complex case of market analysis for a prospective local coffee shop, to a substantial multi-part case on Zimbabwe's hyperinflation. The authors discuss the learning goals for each case and their experience of using it in class. Appendices provide copies of student handouts for three of the four cases. This detailed approach allows instructors to use a specific case, as is, or to use it as a model for designing their own cases.

The book may also be useful for economists interested in engaging in scholarship on teaching and learning. The introductory chapters use an inclusive definition of scholarship in this area – the concept of the 'teaching commons' which includes both formal research leading to journal publication and less-formal sharing of innovative teaching methods and materials. While the book extensively models the dissemination of instructional strategies, some chapters also include quantitative measures on learning outcomes. The volume references formal presentations and publications that resulted from the project. The references listed at the end of each chapter provide a valuable introduction to the academic literature on each teaching strategy.

The book closes with an assessment of the Teaching Innovation Program based on workshop evaluations, a retrospective survey, and participation in post-workshop training and scholarly activities. The vast majority of participants (85–95%) responded very positively to the programme, reflecting an interest in applying active learning strategies within the profession. While this book is not a substitute for attending a programme such as the Teaching Innovation Program workshops, it does illustrate the success of pedagogic innovations across a broad range of courses and gives economists inspiration to try an alternative to the traditional chalk-and-talk lecture.

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