

**Creating a “Teaching/Learning” Evaluation Instrument
For Proficiencies-Based Economics Courses**

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Abstract

This paper describes the nature of my proficiencies-based economics courses and the “teaching/learning” evaluation instrument I developed to help students assess what they learned and to help me determine how I could help students enhance not only their learning but also their ability to learn. The paper begins with a critique of the traditional course/instructor evaluation questionnaires, elaborates my proficiencies-based approach to teaching and learning, describes the evaluation instrument I developed, and then presents the evaluation results based on using this approach in a general, one-semester introductory economics course. The paper concludes with a discussion of the lessons I learned from using this new evaluation instrument with its explicit attention to teaching and learning.

A Mistake

One of my worst professional mistakes occurred in the late 1960s. That is when I joined several colleagues to devise a more effective course evaluation system for the Department of Economics. We were distressed by the sloppy course evaluation system recently instituted by the student government organization, the Wisconsin Student Association (WSA). Its system suffered from asking too many questions, low response rates, and published results that failed to acknowledge the weaknesses of its evaluation system.

Our dissatisfaction led us to develop a computerized format, accompanying procedures for administering course-instructor evaluation questionnaires, and a sharpened set of questions we believed would increase student response rates and provide more accurate information to members of the Economics Department (Hansen and Kelley 1973). Other UW-Madison departments found our system so attractive that more and more of them adopted it. When several years later the Board of Regents mandated regular course evaluation, a variation on our approach became institutionalized over much of the campus.

Our mistake was in concentrating on the mechanics of the evaluation process rather than the substance of evaluation. Aside from cleaning up the wording of several questions, our principal innovation was the addition of a third question to the two widely used questions at the end of the questionnaire: “Would you recommend this course to a friend?” and “Would you recommend this professor to a friend?” We added the question “How would you rate the difficulty of this course relative to your other courses?” We wanted to control for some combination of the

amount of work required and the strictness of the grading standard. This set of three questions found their way into most departmental evaluation surveys. Moreover, their results became instrumental in decisions about tenure, merit raises, and awards for outstanding teaching.

What our evaluation questionnaire failed to do was assess student learning and those factors that might explain differences in student learning. In effect, a major opportunity was missed to develop a course/instructor evaluation instrument that could relate the structure and content of a course as well as the nature of faculty instruction to what and how well students were learning.

This paper begins by elaborating on the principal shortcomings of the most commonly-used course/instructor evaluation instruments. This is followed by a discussion of my recently developed “teaching and learning” evaluation instrument. The results of using this instrument are reported for a one-semester, introductory general economics course I taught for some years and was organized to develop student proficiencies. The paper concludes with the lessons learned from using this new instrument with its explicit attention to teaching and learning.

Background

The standard course/instructor evaluation forms used in most college and university courses are ill-suited to assess courses and instructors whose goals and pedagogy differ significantly from the “chalk and talk” approach so typical in undergraduate instruction (DeLoach 2012, Rebeck and Asarta 2013). This conclusion became clear as I struggled to create an instrument that would be useful for evaluating a newly-designed proficiencies-oriented elementary economics course. The evaluation instrument that emerged downplayed the narrow focus on the surface attributes of courses and instructors (Boex 2000). Instead, it focused on what students learn and does so by asking them to reflect on course content, design, and pedagogy. The illuminating responses provided useful insights about the effectiveness of my teaching and proved helpful in fine-tuning course content, design, and pedagogy to enhance student learning.

The mandated course-instructor evaluation system in place here at UW-Madison is by now deeply embedded in academic life even though little evidence exists as to the accuracy and meaningfulness of the results it produces. Student government organizations, which initiated the course-instructor evaluation system, regularly publish course evaluation results obtained from departments for the purpose of helping students identify the most popular courses and instructors. Departments produce voluminous compilations of course-instructor evaluations each semester to inform department recommendations for merit salary increases, promotions, teaching awards, and the like. Campus-wide faculty promotion committees, wanting to communicate their concern about good teaching, require that course evaluation results be included in department-compiled dossiers of faculty members recommended for promotion to tenured positions.

The machine-scored evaluation questionnaire long used in the Economics Department

includes:

- four Student Data questions, about year in school, plans for majoring in economics, reasons for taking the course, and proportion of class sessions attended;
- seven Faculty Evaluation questions, asking about the proportion of well-prepared and clearly presented lectures, proportion of lectures interesting and/or thought-provoking, usefulness of assigned readings, and effectiveness of exams in measuring knowledge of course material; and
- three Course/Instructor questions whose responses constitute the heart of the form and ask about the relative difficulty of course, whether a respondent would recommend the course to a friend, and how the respondent would rate the professor's performance in the course.

What useful information is conveyed by such summative course-instructor evaluations remains in doubt. Many faculty members privately express skepticism. They wonder whether high rankings reflect superior teaching, easy grading standards, or simply instructor "popularity" (Isely and Singh 2005). In addition, considerable numbers of students do not complete the forms or do so carelessly. Even more important, the forms lack a formative dimension, containing little information that can help interested faculty members improve their teaching. At the very least, any useful evaluation system should be both summative and formative (Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus 1971).

Thus, what began as an effort to improve accountability and instruction has turned into a costly, bureaucratic enterprise of questionable value, with little or no research at UW-Madison to ascertain the validity and reliability of the results. End-of-the-semester course-instructor evaluations are now firmly entrenched; attempting to change them would be difficult if not impossible.

A Proficiencies-Based Course

When it became clear a decade before retiring that I would be teaching regularly, among other courses, a moderately-sized (40-110 student) general economics course, I decided to give it a proficiencies-based approach. This meant reorienting and reorganizing course content, objectives, and pedagogy away from the "chalk and talk" approach, so prominent in the teaching of undergraduate economics (Becker and Watts 1998) to my "expected proficiencies in the economics major" (Hansen 1986).

I developed this approach to teaching in the early 1980s after having experimented with various components of this approach during the previous decade. The idea underlying this approach can be framed in the question: How do we want our economics majors to be able to

demonstrate what they learned the day after they graduate when they are no longer disciplined by class attendance, reading assignments, home work exercises, examinations, and course grades. Based on extensive contacts with officials in government, private sector leaders, colleagues, and recently graduated economics majors, I devised a set of what became the seven proficiencies expected of economics majors (Hansen 1986, 2001, 2009, 2012). Here is the current list:

- 1) Accessing and organizing existing knowledge
- 2) Displaying command of existing knowledge
- 3) Interpreting existing knowledge
- 4) Interpreting and manipulating quantitative data
- 5) Applying existing knowledge
- 6) Creating new knowledge
- 7) Questing for knowledge and understanding

These proficiencies have two dimensions. The first is a hierarchy in the spirit of ever more complex levels of knowledge and understanding that students are expected to demonstrate (Bloom 1956). The first six proficiencies within this hierarchy, range from the lowest cognitive level, how to access information, to the highest level, creating knowledge. The second dimension is represented by the seventh proficiency, a cross-cutting, all-purpose proficiency that does not fit neatly into this hierarchy. It might best be described as “questing for knowledge and understanding,” the ability to ask penetrating questions and to engage effectively with others in exploring and discussing economic issues and policies.

The challenge came in figuring out how to begin developing these proficiencies in what would be the first and perhaps only economics course many students would take. Clearly, not enough time was available in this single introductory course to master all the proficiencies expected of graduating economics majors. Instead, emphasis was placed on the importance of nurturing these proficiencies sufficiently to help students, largely freshmen and sophomores, succeed in this course and at the same time begin to acquire the proficiencies that will be of value to them no matter what major they might choose. Because it would be unreasonable to expect introductory students to tackle the highest level proficiency, that of creating new knowledge #6, the course concentrated on developing at some basic level the first five proficiencies, with additional attention to proficiency #7.

As a start, students needed to understand the proficiencies and be actively involved in their own learning; thus, the course Reading Packet included the Hansen paper (1986) describing these proficiencies. The texts selected and the contents of the Reading Packet were designed to highlight and reinforce the key concepts and principles being taught within the context of a course that emphasized contemporary economic issues and policies. Consistent with this objective, considerable attention was given to enhancing economic literacy, by linking the concepts being studied to current newspaper articles that illustrated how these economic concepts were being applied in the outside world (Hansen, Salemi, and Siegfried 2002). To reinforce the

importance of the proficiencies, I tried to model them in lectures and also in weekly discussion sessions that were structured to involve students and challenge them in new ways (Hansen and Salemi 1990, and Salemi and Hansen 2005).

The design of the course encompassed six major components. First, setting out the course objectives, the content knowledge to be learned, and the proficiencies to be developed. Second, deciding on the appropriate instructional materials. Third, selecting the pedagogies to be used in the course. Fourth, giving students practice in applying what they were learning. Fifth, requiring students to demonstrate not only what they learned (the economics content knowledge) but also their ability to use that knowledge (the proficiencies). Sixth, encouraging students to reflect more actively on their learning.

The importance of gaining practice in the proficiencies was emphasized by teaching the course as a writing-intensive course (Hansen 1993b, 1999). The importance of students being able to apply their learning to current economic issues was emphasized by several major writing assignments; these assignments required students to select recent newspapers articles and analyze them for the economic concepts and principles embedded in these articles. To help students prepare for alternate-week discussion sections that I led, they had to write a summary or precis for each of the assigned readings or three types of questions to guide these discussions. Finally, students were challenged to submit two prepared questions (and their answers to them) suitable for inclusion in each of the three exams, including the final exam. In short, the course was designed to help students develop these proficiencies by engaging them in a wide array of learning activities that promoted these proficiencies.

Officially, this was a three-credit course, but the campus timetable listed three (Monday-Wednesday-Friday) lectures along with four discussion sections (Thursday or Friday). Because I would have to miss several lecture periods, and because I wanted to teach the discussion sections, these sections did not meet every week. On average, the class meet about three and one-half times a week. I was careful to explain the heavier workload at the opening session of the course and in the syllabus. I also indicated I rather than a teaching assistant would meet the discussion sections, and consequently I too would be working harder than I was required to do. I went on to explain quite candidly that I wanted to work closely with them in a variety of ways to help them enhance both their content knowledge and proficiencies in economics.

About the Course and Its Evaluation

The most immediate challenge was to figure out how best to describe the proficiencies-oriented course to students during the opening week of classes. Introducing courses that differ in some fundamental way, such as the writing intensive courses I taught regularly, takes some explaining. Students must first be informed about how the course differs from their other courses and then convinced they will benefit from the different approach taken in this particular course.

The proficiencies approach required even more elaboration because of its dramatically different approach. I devoted considerable time in each of the first two class meetings to explaining the proficiencies approach and its implementation. I indicated my keen interest in helping students learn more and doing it better and faster by engaging them in a variety of learning activities that would be new to most of them. I made it clear the course would be demanding; it would include a larger than usual number of assignments they were required to turn in for my evaluation. Finally, I indicated my interest in learning from them how they perceived the course, what advantages it had for them, and what additional costs in time and effort were involved.

Early on, students got the flavor of my interest from an end of the fourth week evaluation. This evaluation format was not new. I always found it useful to get early feedback on the course. To add to its legitimacy, I asked a group of student volunteers to administer the evaluation, tabulate and summarize the results, and discuss with me the evaluation results prior to the next class meeting. After the volunteers conveyed the evaluation results to me, I went to the next class where I summarized these results. Most of the results were familiar to me from past semesters—poor handwriting on the blackboard, talking too fast, requiring too much work, and so on. I told them I would try to deal positively with their suggestions. On some matters, I had to explain the importance of some facet of the course, e.g., the writing assignments, and why it was important in helping them learn economics. Students were usually disarmed by my openness, and I did try to overcome my obvious shortcomings.

In conducting this early evaluation, I am trying to enlist students to make a stronger commitment to the course and the challenges of learning. What always surprises me is how little time students say they devote to not only my course but also to their other courses. When the modal response is usually 3-4 hours per week for my course, I remind them of the old rule of thumb, which is to study two hours outside of class for every hour spent in class. Most students have never heard of the rule; I explain that all freshmen heard this rule in an earlier age when grading standards were much tougher. This gives me a chance to recommend that students devote more time to not only my course but all their other courses if they are to make the most of their undergraduate experience.

I also take the occasion to give them a brief economics lesson. They need to be reminded of not only the “sticker price” cost of their education but also the “opportunity cost” of attending college, namely the earnings they forego while attending college. I close by noting the substantial “tuition subsidy” they receive from state taxpayers who include their parents, a subsidy that in the last years I taught was still equal to the amount of tuition they paid.

Toward the end of the semester, I explain that I will need their assistance in conducting a more detailed end-of-the-semester evaluation. Students are receptive to this idea because by this time it was apparent that students appreciated the course and how it was conducted. Meanwhile, the department agreed to allow me rather than a department secretary to administer the evaluation. By being present, I signaled my interest in having students respond thoughtfully to the

evaluation questions, not only the standard questions but also the much more detailed questions specific to course content, design, and pedagogy. Students were given more time to respond (about 30 minutes rather than the usual 10 minutes). When students completed their evaluation, I designated a student to collect the forms, place them in a sealed envelope, and deliver them to the department office for later processing. To ensure confidentiality, these forms as well as a summary of the machine-read responses were turned over to me only after I submitted my course grades.

Creating the New Evaluation Form

I gave considerable thought to what kinds of student feedback would be useful in evaluating my efforts to enhance student learning in economics, develop their proficiencies, and increase their awareness of what and how they were learning (Hansen 1993a). The newly designed evaluation form sought answers to seven major questions:

1. Did the course deliver what it promised to deliver? The focus here was on the four major content objectives cited in the syllabus.

2. How effective were the instructional materials and pedagogy described in the syllabus and the Reading Packet in helping students learn the subject matter? The purpose was to ascertain their perceived effectiveness of each of 15 different types of instruction-related materials and assignments, including the instructional materials used (texts, Reading Packet, handouts), pedagogy employed (lectures, discussions, and structured group discussion), learning activities utilized (preparing questions on readings, writing assignments, preparing study questions for exams), and type of exams employed (essay and short-answer questions). This long list provided useful information to me; in addition, it was included to stimulate student thinking about the usefulness of the proficiencies approach to learning.

3. How effective were the varied learning activities in improving the ability of students to use their content knowledge of economics? The list included 10 different kinds of learning activities, all of them related to the proficiencies though not on a one-to-one basis.

4. Which of the 15 categories of instruction-related materials and assignments were *most helpful* in learning the subject matter? To sharpen their responses, students were asked to check no more than four of the 15 items.

5. How much emphasis should be given in the following semester to each of the 10 different kinds of learning activities to help students improve their ability to use their knowledge? Students were asked to respond to each item.

6. How did students evaluate this course/instructor based on the key questions included in the Department's standard evaluation form? These questions ask (a) about the relative difficulty of the course, (b) whether a student would recommend the course to a friend, and (c) how the

student would rate the professor's performance in the course. These questions had to be included so the evaluation results for this course would be comparable to those for the rest of the Department's courses. I assumed the answers to these mandated questions would be better informed because students had already been asked to respond to a more complex group of questions that pushed them to think more deeply about the distinctive features of the course and what they learned.

7. What additional observations did students offer in the open-ended questions that were an integral part of the evaluation form? Students were asked to elaborate on two sentence-completion statements and to respond to three specific questions. The two sentence-completion statements were: A. "The thing I liked most about this course is . . ." And, B. "The thing I liked least about this course is . . .". The three specific questions were: C. "Please describe how you think your ability to write has been improved as a result of this course." D. "What part of the course proved to be most interesting/stimulating?" and F. "Should the course materials (books, reading packet, handouts) be changed?" Students also had the option (E.) of writing additional comments on the back of the evaluation form.

Evaluation Results

This "teaching/learning approach" to evaluation was regularly over a five year period. Because the questionnaire was evolving as I gained experience using it, I report here on the results for the two most recent semesters, one class with 52 students and the other with 41 students. The results shown in the several numbered panels below combine the responses since the results for the two classes were very similar.

The responses in the right-hand column are reordered from highest to lowest; the original ordering of the questions is shown by the number preceding each item. The lettered panels that follow include a representative selection from the large number of open-ended comments; almost every student responded to my request for these additional comments, and a number of them wrote lengthy comments. I should add that most of the comments were quite flattering.

Here are the evaluation results, organized by question numbers:

1. Did the course deliver what it promised to deliver?

<u>Question 1</u> : How well did the course meet the four objectives listed in the syllabus? (4=Very Effective; 3=Effective; 2=Somewhat Effective; 1=Not Effective)	
2. Highlight the evolution of economic thinking about the role of market economies	3.4
1. Describe the structure of the US economy and the major issues it faces	3.3
4. Offer extensive practice in applying these concepts to current issues and policies, through class discussion and also through writing about what you are learning	3.3
3. Focus on a selected group of concepts that can be used to examine current economic issues and policies	3.1

2. How effective were the instructional materials and pedagogy in helping students master the subject matter?

<p><u>Question 2:</u> Please rate each item for its help in learning the subject matter of the course. (4=Very helpful; 3=Helpful; 2=Somewhat helpful; 1=Not helpful)</p>	
8. Discussion of current economic events in lecture	3.5
7. Lectures and interaction in lectures	3.3
9. Discussion of <i>Reading Packet</i> articles in section meetings	3.3
14. Studying student-prepared questions for exams	3.2
1. Text: Edgmand et al, <i>Economics and Contemporary Issues</i>	3.1
5. Hansen: <i>Reading Packet</i> (i.e., course details and readings)	3.1
12. Completing writing assignments on current news articles	3.1
10. Summary/Precis writing on <i>Reading Packet</i> readings	3.0
15. Having exams with essay and short-answer questions	3.0
2. Blinder book: <i>Hard Heads and Soft Hearts</i>	2.9
3. Okun book: <i>Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff</i>	2.9
6. Handouts distributed in class (current news articles)	2.7
11. Writing factual, interpretative, and evaluative questions on <i>Reading Packet</i> articles	2.7
13. Preparing written questions/answers for exams	2.7
4. Lanham book on <i>Revising Prose</i> /Williams book on <i>Style</i>	1.7

3. How effective were the varied learning activities in improving the ability of students to use their knowledge?

Question 3: Please indicate the helpfulness of each item in improving your ability to use your knowledge. (3=Very helpful; 2= Helpful; 1 Not helpful)	
5. Learning how to relate course concepts to current economic events	2.6
1. Understanding key economic data (e.g., unemployment rate)	2.5
6. Learning how to identify economic concepts in newspaper/magazine articles	2.4
7. Learning how to interpret news articles based on their economic concepts	2.4
8. Learning how to write an analysis of economic concepts in news articles	2.4
10. Learning to think more critically	2.4
4. Learning how to participate in small group discussion in section meetings	2.3
9. Learning more about your writing skills from instructor comments on your papers	2.1
2. Learning how to write a precis	2.0
3. Learning how to write factual, interpretative, and evaluative questions	2.0

4. Which of the 15 categories of instruction-related materials and assignments did the most to stimulate student interest in learning the course subject matter?

<p><u>Question 4:</u> What four factors most stimulated your interest in this course? (The results are reported as percentages of students picking each option, normalized to 100%.)</p>	
8. Discussion of current economic events in lecture	100
9. Discussion of <i>Reading Packet</i> articles in section meetings	69
7. Lectures and interaction in lectures	61
5. Hansen: <i>Reading Packet</i> (i.e., course details and readings)	54
12. Completing writing assignments on current news articles	54
2. Blinder book: <i>Hard Heats and Soft Hearts</i>	46
1. Text: Edgmand et al, <i>Economics and Contemporary Issues</i>	39
3. Okun book: <i>Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff</i>	31
6. Handouts distributed in class	31
10. Precis writing on <i>Reading Packet</i> articles	15
11. Writing factual, interpretative, and evaluative questions on <i>Reading Packet</i> articles	8
15. Having exams with essay and short-answer questions	8
14. Studying student-prepared questions for exams	3
4. Lanham book on <i>Revising Prose</i> /Williams book on <i>Style</i>	0
13. Preparing written questions/answers for exams	0

5. How much emphasis should be given in the following semester to each of the 10 different learning activities so as to help students improve their ability to use their knowledge?

<u>Question 5:</u> Please rate each of the following as to whether they should receive more or less emphasis when the course is taught again next semester. (3=More; 2=About the same; 1=Less)	
5. Learning how to relate course concepts to current economic events	2.5
10. Learning to think more critically	2.4
1. Understanding of key economic data (e.g., unemployment rate)	2.3
4. Learning how to participate in small group discussion in section meetings	2.3
8. Learning how to write an analysis of economic concepts in news articles	2.3
9. Learning more about your writing skills from instructor comments on your papers	2.3
6. Learning how to identify economic concepts in newspaper/magazine articles	2.2
7. Learning how to interpret news articles based on their economic concepts	2.2
2. Learning how to write a precis	2.0
3. Learning how to write factual, interpretative, and evaluative questions	1.9

6. How did students evaluate the course and instructor using the key questions from the Department's standard course-instructor evaluation form?

<u>Question 6:</u> Key Questions from the department's course-instructor evaluation form, with average responses for similar courses in the department shown in parentheses.	
1. How does this course compare with your other university courses in terms of difficulty? (compared to the department average for similar courses) (1=Much less difficult; 2=Less difficult; 3=About the same; 4=More difficult; 5=Much more difficult)	3.8 (3.4)
2. Would you recommend this course to a friend with similar interests? (compared to the department average for similar courses) (1=Definitely not; 2=Probably not; 3=Not sure; 4=Yes, probably; 5=Yes, definitely)	3.6 (3.5)
3. All in all, in comparison with other instructors you have seen at UW-Madison, how would you rate the professor's performance in this course? (compared to the department average for similar courses) (1=Poor; 2=Fair; 3=Average; 4=Good; 5=Excellent)	4.5 (3.9)

7. What additional observations did students express in the open-ended questions?

A. “The thing I liked most about this course is . . .”

- We had the opportunity to integrate what we were learning in class and from the book with what is really going on in the world. The type of hands on application is by far the best way to learn because we see first hand the benefits of studying-learning.
- The papers and exams were very effective and complementary. I applaud you for forcing us to think critically rather than merely factually. I’ve very fond of your personal, casual teaching style.
- The professor’s involvement—it showed he really cared about teaching and that made the learning environment quite positive.
- Everything (Reading Packet, Professor, lectures, discussions) was beneficial. It was a lot of work but I’ll miss it. I like him—he expected a lot from us—and took the time to get to know us.
- Emphasis on writing and critical thinking.

B. “The thing I liked least about the course . . .”

- The grading of the written assignments including exams was too tough.
- Too much work for a 3-credit course. It was a difficult course.
- Too much emphasis on writing. I understood the economics but am not a good writer. So my grade will not reflect how well I know the material.
- I feel that more time should be given on how to write an analysis of a news article. Perhaps an explanation in the reading packet [with examples] from actual students.
- Some of the readings were very bland and one-dimensional.
- Precis writing.

C. "Please describe how you think your ability to write has been improved as a result of this course"

- I came into the course thinking I was a very good writer. Technically, I was but the article assignments call for a different kind of writing that was very helpful.
- Writing for this course is different than that required in other courses I've taken. The ability to condense an issue while including all pertinent information is difficult. I haven't gotten it down to a fine science but with practice I will.
- I learned that writing clearly so people can understand is just as important as what you write about.

D. "What part of the course proved to be most interesting/stimulating?"

- The discussion sessions were most stimulating. The interaction proved beneficial by helping students learn through discussion, as well as by making me think harder about the reading material the night before.
- The lectures and discussions where we talked about current events.
- Learning what great economists thought and having that tied to current economic issues we discussed.
- The open interpretative questions in discussion.
- The most interesting part, believe it or not, was learning about supply and demand.
- The Okun and Blinder books.

E. "Should the course materials (books, reading packet, handouts) be changed?"

- Eliminate book on writing.
- Textbook excellent.
- I think the text was too technical.
- Some of the material was difficult and required a second reading.
- The Reading Packet was long, dry reading but was useful and interesting.
- Work load too much for a 3-credit course.

F. "Other comments."

- I have learned and retained more from this class than any other course I have taken here at UW-Madison.
- Prof. Hansen is a very demanding instructor. This is what the college experience should be about. I wish I would have known about this course when I was a freshman.
- Professor Hansen was by far the best instructor I have had so far in college. He is much more willing to help students than other instructors I have seen. Really tried to get student involvement. A 4-star prof!
- It is nice to know there are profs like Hansen. He is the first one I've encountered here who puts visible effort into his class. I didn't like all the course work but it was a good experience.
- It was a very difficult course and I worked harder in this than any other course I've taken so far. I didn't expect this but I learned about economics and I am glad I took this class.

Interpretation

What did this “teaching/learning” approach to evaluation tell me that I needed to know about course content, design, and pedagogy? And, how did I react to the students comments?

I was pleased that students felt the course’s content objectives had been met (Question 1), students most valued the student-teacher interaction in the lectures and discussion sections (Question 2), students appreciated the “active learning” nature of the course, particularly “learning how to relate course concepts to current economic events” (Question 3), student interest was most stimulated by the same activities that contributed most to their learning (Question 4), students who had already commented favorably on the importance of “learning how to relate course concepts to current economic issues” and “learning to think more critically” wanted these activities to be even more heavily emphasized in the future (Question 5), and the high ranking given in response to the Department’s evaluation question, “how would you rate the professor’s performance in this course” occurred despite the “more difficult” nature of the course and the somewhat greater reluctance to recommend the course to others (Question 6).

I was also pleased with the constructiveness and the praise expressed in the Open-Response questions. Despite the demanding nature of the course, student comments indicated they appreciated the course, how the instructor organized and taught it, and what and how they learned.

What aspects of the course were most in need of attention? The major criticism was the heavy workload —students regarded it as too great for the three credits they earned. Students objected to the amount of writing required and how it was evaluated even though the course carried a “writing-intensive” label in the course catalog. Some students also commented that more should have been done to demonstrate how to write an analysis of a news article dealing with an economic issue. Students were not happy with the two question-writing activities but still gave a high ranking to studying from the student-prepared exam questions that resulted from an activity they did not profess to enjoy. In addition, students not only did not like the book on writing but also objected to buying it in light of the minimal use made of it.

Here were my reactions. Student concerns about the workload had some merit. Yes, the course was much more demanding than most other courses, at least those in the social sciences and humanities. While it would be easy to reduce the workload and the number of writing assignments, I am not sure doing so would be in the best interests of the students; many of them needed to sharpen their learning skills and experience. Yes, the grading was tough but I attribute student concern in considerable part to often-rampant grade inflation in other disciplines. I viewed the escalating grade inflation as no reason for me to relax my grading standard. Yes, the Reading Packet should have contained a Guide with examples of how to write a news analysis. Though Guides were provided to help students develop other skills such as writing discussion questions, I failed to have develop this particular type of Guide. Yes, the question-writing activities were demanding but students needed to develop this skill. Yes, the writing book was not used enough to warrant its purchase even though every student should possess a writing book for general reference; in future offerings of the course, I would still require a writing book but make greater

use of it.

My principal conclusion is that the course accomplished the goals I set for it but that some fine-tuning was required. Most important was my need to do a better job explaining to students the importance of what we were doing, why we were doing what we did, and how the various elements of the course fit together and reinforced each another.

Lessons Learned

Developing and implementing this new “teaching/learning” instrument produced useful knowledge about the untapped potential of teaching/learning evaluations. By incorporating the several required questions from the standard evaluation forms, individual faculty members can create evaluation forms that meet their needs as well as those of their departments.

What most impressed me was the willingness of students to respond to the many questions in this much more detailed end-of-semester evaluation form. Not only did students respond to all 55 items but they devoted considerable time and thought in responding to the open-ended questions. I was also impressed by the willingness of students to indicate through their detailed comments that they really cared about what they were learning and how the course and instructor contributed to their learning. There was no reason to believe these students were special in any sense. The course itself had no special prerequisites—it was one of three options open to students: a small honors course, a large lecture course with discussion sections led by teaching assistants, and this course.

What made the difference? It was the combination of a more challenging course, an evaluation instrument geared explicitly to the course, and a sense that the responses would be used to improve the course. This experience demonstrates that faculty members through “teaching/learning” evaluation forms can obtain helpful feedback to use in altering course design, objectives, and pedagogy. They can also identify barriers to student learning and attempt to overcome them. Finally, they can learn much about what their teaching is doing to enhance student learning.

Beyond this, what else did I learn? Most important, students are willing, even eager, to engage more fully in mastering course content and simultaneously improving their learning skills. They are willing to do so even with a heavier course workload and a tougher grading regime because they perceive positive benefits both in what and how they learned. As the open-ended comments revealed, students felt they mastered the economic content and improved their ability to apply their learning to understanding and interpreting current economic issues and problems. They enhanced their writing and discussion skills through the wide range of learning activities, they increased their ability to think, write, and discuss analytically and critically, and they appreciated the instructor’s efforts to help them learn more and become better learners.

I discovered once again that interacting closely with undergraduate students, as we regularly do with graduate students, can be richly rewarding personally; it is also consistent with my philosophy about the importance of teaching undergraduates in a major research university. Finally, the degree of intellectual engagement experienced in the class represents what I am sure all of us would like our own children to experience in college.

Readers interested in the “bottom line” will ask how the results presented above square with the responses to the three questions from the standard evaluation form? As is apparent from the results for Question 6, this course was perceived as more difficult than comparable entry-level courses in economics, i.e., large lecture courses and small honors courses. Compared to other entry-level economics courses, this course received a slightly higher ranking on recommending the course to others and a much more favorable ranking for the professor.

The proficiencies-oriented course was viewed as slightly more difficult than earlier versions of this same course, with its difficulty rating moving up from 3.7 to 3.8 on the five-point scale. The “recommend the course to a friend” rating dropped from 4.0 to 3.6 but was still higher than that for other comparable courses in the department. Finally, the “how would you rank the professor’s performance” rating rose slightly from 4.4 to 4.5, thereby increasing the gap between this course and other comparable courses in the department. These differences underestimate the impact of shifting to a full-fledged proficiencies course because in the pre-proficiency versions many elements of the proficiencies approach were being gradually implemented and tested.

These additional results can be interpreted as follows: the heavier workload and greater difficulty of the course decreased its attractiveness. The negligible increase in the “rate the professor” question can be attributed in considerable part to the instructor’s already high 4.4 rating in his prior teaching. The drop in the rating on recommending the course to others is probably attributable to the heavier workload. Although these results apply to a single course and a single instructor, they accord with the traditional view that more difficult courses are generally viewed as less attractive notwithstanding a high regard for the professors who teach them.

Interesting as these results may be, they fail to capture the full impact of the course and instruction on student learning. That is why the responses to the open-ended questions are so useful. Indeed, it was the absence of well-formulated questions that prompted me to redesign the traditional course/instructor evaluation form.

Two questions lurk below the surface. One is how to make the case for adopting a proficiencies-based approach to economics courses, and for that matter, to other courses as well. The other is how to shift to a “teaching/learning” focus in college instruction. College faculties must rethink their approach to course/instructor evaluations. They must reduce the smothering bureaucratic administration of evaluations so that students and faculty members can realize the potential of “teaching/learning-based” evaluations. Individual faculty members must find new ways of combining course content, design, and pedagogy to more fully engage students in their own

learning. They must give greater emphasis to what and how students learn, and what they can do with their learning after acquiring it. Above all, it means encouraging faculty members to focus on what students are learning and how their intellectual development is being stimulated in the process. Instituting a proficiencies-based approach to instruction and learning offers an effective means of accomplishing these objectives.

In closing, I am reminded of the admonition from fellow economist Ren Fels (1993). He lamented the fact that all too frequently instructors tout new ways of doing things and then proclaim the wonderful results without offering replicable evidence their new ways will work for others as well as for themselves. My only defense is that the approach to course evaluation described here is an essential building block in constructing an effective proficiencies-based course, one that is much more likely than the typical “chalk and talk” approach to produce lasting effects by equipping students to practice their learning long after they graduate.

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