

## ECONOMIST EDUCATORS – 2015 BEST IN CLASS AWARD CONTEST SUBMISSION: PODLEARNING BY REBECCA MORYL, PHD., EMMANUEL COLLEGE.

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Economics instructors, like all educators, seek to help students work toward course learning goals. In an ideal world, a course progresses toward an assignment that allows students to demonstrate their ability to evaluate, analyze and apply their economics learning to their world. This paper outlines an innovative project where students work in groups to produce an original podcast, which demonstrates their ability to apply economics to their lives. I call it PodLearning, with the 'pod' referencing both the shared-learning experience of working in 'pods' of their peers, and the audio podcast that is their final product.

PodLearning provides an innovative opportunity for students to develop and demonstrate proficiency in skills required for the undergraduate economics major and valued in the professional marketplace. PodLearning requires students to demonstrate complex higher learning proficiencies, fosters collaborative learning, and develops oral communication skills – all in a structure that reduces the impact on an instructor's time as compared to individual assignments. PodLearning capitalizes on technology to allow students to demonstrate their command of economics knowledge, as well as their ability to interpret and apply this knowledge (Hansen 2001). Creating a podcast allows students to develop and demonstrate their oral communication skills, an area important to the field that is often lacking in traditional economics major programs due to the demands on time and assessment skills of instructors (Siegfried 1998; Walstad 2001). The group-work format of PodLearning provides opportunities for students to exchange ideas and identify and improve gaps in reasoning and application. Research shows that collaborative problem solving increases student enjoyment of learning economics in a structure that fosters development of communication and teamwork skills (Johnston, James, Lye & McDonald 2000).

Students work in groups of 3-4 peers to develop an original podcast that demonstrates how economic issues and concepts can be observed and analyzed in the world. The podcasts are maximum 10 minutes in length to allow for in-depth consideration of issues, while retaining focus and a manageable length for review and assessment. The audio format facilitates collaborative work more than a written assignment with similar learning objectives could do, while the use of student groups minimizes the time cost for instructors. Across the two years I have assigned this project, student podcasts have addressed topics as varied as the impact of changing gasoline prices on small business, the black market for prescription drugs used to get a study boost, the coffee market in Venezuela, student housing decision making, and the impact of a guacamole shortage on fast food chains. Students have utilized concepts such as elasticity, factors of demand and supply, surge pricing, substitutes, utility, and marginal cost and benefit in analyzing events in their lives and the wider world.

The materials required to implement PodLearning are easily accessible, manageable and free. The recommended software for students to use in creating the podcast is Audacity, a free downloadable software supported by a variety of operating systems (Windows, Mac, Linux). Audacity is commonly recommended for newcomers to podcasting because it is easy to use and allows the recording and editing of multiple audio tracks (Döpel 2007). Audacity online tutorials covering recording, editing, incorporating music, and exporting to Mp3 format are free and easy to use. Students can use their mobile phones for recording audio tracks, though instructors may want to have one or two microphones available for teams to borrow and use in order to achieve higher quality audio. I have found it best to provide a scaffold of assignments to guide student success and provide feedback along the way toward the final podcast submission. The video associated with his paper explains a simple scaffold of four

assignment components to facilitate effective group work and achievement of the goals of PodLearning. Instructors can incorporate the full scaffold, or tailor the structure to suit their needs and instructional style.

While I have implemented PodLearning in introductory economics courses, the focus or scope of the assignment could easily be tailored to the content and level of most courses. Instructors could require upper level students to include interviews with experts in the field that students can share or analyze, research-based historical reenactments featuring different economic thinkers, or an economic analysis of a current policy proposal or issue.

Much has been written about the role of faculty using podcasts as an instructional learning tool or classroom supplement. In that literature students consistently indicate their increased engagement and enjoyment when podcasts are integrated as an instructional component. PodLearning is an extension of this use of podcasts in instruction, putting it in the hands of students to create their own learning experience. In course evaluations from the 2014-2015 academic year students volunteered positive feedback of the PodLearning experience. Comments included:

- “Fun assignments, such as creating our own podcasts... made the learning more enjoyable and showed how applicable what we were learning in class was to the real world.”
- “I loved being able to find a situation in the real world and see how they connect to microeconomic concepts ...we kept thinking of more econ concepts as we went, which was cool”
- “Interviewing other people and then analyzing their comments/opinions from an economic perspective strengthened my ability in applying (micro)/economic concepts to the real world”
- “In all honesty I am not an economics person. However, I enjoyed how we were able to take what we learned in class and apply it to the real world through the podcasts”

You can view the video that I created about PodLearning on YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/nuawnkLFrhA>

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