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Submission to 'Common Core Teaching Excellence Award'
SOSC1440 Introduction to Economics (Enrollment: 119)

In this course I share my passion for using economics to make sense of how our society operates.

The course starts with the definition of economics—"the study of scarcity and its implications"—and explores how the concept of scarcity shapes all aspects of our lives. Extracts from anthropologist Marshall Sahlín's *Stone Age Economics* (covering hunter-gatherer societies) illustrate what life is like in a society where the concept of scarcity does not exist. Once we settle on the overarching theme of output and economic growth to overcome scarcity, we vivisect the commonly used definition of output, GDP (gross domestic product) to realize that it is a deeply flawed measure. We ponder to what extent our political and economic system is built around (a rather meaningless) GDP, and the consequences of such a 'fetish' (for example, for the environment). This critical examination of the very foundation of economics carries through the course to the economic theories we study. --- Common core objectives: "broaden horizons and liberate the mind," "develop analytical capacity and independent thinking."

Students are taking on the order of five courses a semester. The structure of this course is intentionally kept as simple and clear as possible, while asking students to continuously engage. We use just one Canvas page to cumulatively chronicle what happens each class (revised after each class to take into account whatever current affairs I chose to include and whatever changes developed during a class). All course materials are available on Canvas and linked into that one Canvas page. In the Tue/Thu class, a regular assignment is given every Thursday, due the following Tuesday; a mini assignment is given every Tuesday, due the following Thursday. There is a midterm exam and a final exam (in the final exam period) using multiple choice questions and offering a choice among essay questions.

We cover c.85% of a standard textbook on (mostly macro-) economics whose material takes up c.60% of the class time (including regular assignments covered in class); 80% of the regular assignments review that material.

The purpose of the mini assignments is for students to themselves gather economic facts and to apply the economics we study. Students explore Hong Kong statistics on GDP, inflation, and labor in order to gain exposure to data sources and to understand the fundamentals of our economy. They are challenged to contrast economic theory with environmental realities (structured around a TEDx talk on 'Doughnut Economics'). Other mini assignments cover short readings: a newspaper article that presents the Hong Kong government primarily as a landlord (with immediate and far-reaching implications, including for current population movements); a few pages from a book on Germany's Third Reich (showing the implications of economic factors for the rise of fascism, and exploring the relevance to Hong Kong today); and passages from a book on land monopoly and governance in Hong Kong (able to explain the extent of quasi-monopolies in Hong Kong's economy as well as societal structures). We dissect, paragraph by paragraph, a former investment banker's two-page tirade in the *South China Morning Post* on the coming collapse of the U.S. economy, using our economics to

determine what makes sense and what doesn't, repeatedly revealing demagoguery masquerading for economics, and noting the implications of the valid arguments for the case of the PRC: the author's valid arguments point to the collapse of the PRC economy, rather than, as claimed in the article, of the U.S. economy. --- Common core objectives "broaden horizons and liberate the mind," "develop analytical capacity and independent thinking," "foster appreciation of social issues, and scientific and technological precision."

We watch two feature films, *Inside Job* about the U.S. financial crisis, and Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* about inequality and the return to feudal structures. Following assignments on the films, we closely tie the films to economics *and* to students' own experiences. For example, the question of how the U.S. financial crisis of 2008 affects students today may at first draw blanks, but when we prod on and look at the impact on interest rates and the effects of a currency peg (these being textbook material), students connect the dots ("we had to move to a smaller apartment"). The issue of inequality and the return to feudal structures has immediate parallels in Hong Kong. --- Common core objectives: "spark passion for learning, broaden horizons and liberate the mind," develop analytical capacity and independent thinking," and "foster appreciation social issues, and scientific and technological precision."

Regular assignments and mini-assignments are graded pass/fail, remunerating effort; all too often there is no 'right' or 'wrong' but an argument to be made. (Students need to submit 70-80% of all assignments for full points.) I do not take class attendance and include no subjective evaluation element (for example, "class participation") as I am not interested in students 'making nice' with the professor. As I state in the first class, I am interested in together with students exploring economics today and not in policing or grading students; the grading thing is simply a game that the university/society plays, to be disposed of as painlessly and fairly as possible. I treat students as adults: there is no nit-picking over assignment answers, no questioning of a student's personal economic cost-benefit analysis (such as whether to attend a 9am class or not, cost-benefit analysis being one of the topics of an early class), and no judgment as to the effort they put into the assignments. Some students like this approach, others may not, and some may not be capable of making responsible choices and of taking responsibility for their choices (which would have an important life lesson in store).

The beauty of a diverse faculty is that students can choose to be exposed to many different ways of teaching (just as, in a job, the graduate will grow through many different situations), that for each student some teacher resonates more than another, and that students can choose with which teacher they wish to learn. The School of Humanities and Social Science offers a wide variety of courses of varied difficulty, this course is an economics course and it is not an 'easy' course. (One student's feedback in the identical twin course SOSC 1449 is that "Compared to other courses in the business school, I find this course to be notably more difficult.")

A typical class runs as follows:

- Current affairs: typically a *Financial Times* article of the last couple of days that ties in with today's class material, to illustrate how the textbook material has a direct correspondence to what happens in our lives.

- Go over the assignment – for standard economics problems, this is I succinctly presenting the answers on the visualizer, for typically about 30 minutes (and releasing lengthy model answers afterwards), while allowing ample opportunity for 'thinking'

questions, this is a back-and-forth conversation with students. (About every second instance of covering a regular assignment in class, I check back with students if we spent too little, just the right amount, or too much time on the assignments, and have always hit the ‘just the right amount’ by significant majority feedback.)

For most classes I have a relevant short video, followed by discussion as relevant. A couple of times, we “act out” economics, such as when we create more and more money out of (almost) nothing.

Lecture: dependent on student and my preferences on the given day, about two-thirds of lectures ended up being I covering the material on one sheet of paper on the visualizer; the remainder was I using powerpoint slides. Powerpoint slides are available on Canvas. The textbook is available as eBook in the library.

Regarding the “ABC LIVE” “attributes,” students taking my course should be able to achieve all except “L,” leadership and teamwork. Given the time constraint (one semester course) and the enrollment size, turning the course into a “L” course would mean sacrificing too many of the other “attributes,” or spreading the “attributes” too thin.

While I have taken half a dozen workshops with the HKUST Center for Education Innovation over the last two years alone, I agree with Parkier J. Palmer (*The Courage to Teach*) that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” Further, the role of the teacher is to give ‘great things’ an independent voice while teaching serves as a laser to discern the crucial elements; the teacher opens up space (for students to probe) rather than occupies it. That is what I try to adhere to in my classes. I have the impression that Hong Kong students in particular have a tendency to look at the professor as a truth-conveying authority; in my classes, I break that mold. Economics is a discipline that makes heavy use of assumptions (to simplify ‘reality’ in order to identify core relationships). Rather than ignore or quickly bypass, I emphasize (and invite questioning of) the underlying assumptions and we explore the consequences of omitting certain variables (such as the environment, or social justice, which we may value), encouraging students not to take authority for granted but to think and probe independently.

I am delighted that some students recognize my teaching and I am honored that my classes make a difference in some students’ lives.

PS: I am puzzled by the following:

One of HKUST’s declared five core values is academic freedom, and HKUST’s Strategic Plan 2021-2018 explicitly references Cary Nelson’s *insidehighered* definition of academic freedom, where

“academic freedom,” among others, “gives faculty members substantial latitude in deciding how to teach the courses for which they are responsible.”

It also “establishes a faculty member’s right to remain true to his or her pedagogical philosophy and intellectual commitments. It preserves the intellectual integrity of our educational system and thus serves the public good.”

And it “means that the political, religious, or philosophical beliefs of politicians, *administrators* [emphasis added], and members of the public cannot be imposed on students or faculty.”

If HKUST faculty members indeed enjoy academic freedom (not to mention intellectual “integrity,” another HKUST core value), then I simply do not see how some administrator’s “pedagogical philosophy” or “beliefs”—such as common core “objectives” or “ABC Live”—are anything other than irrelevant to faculty members’ teaching and to any evaluation of faculty members’ teaching.

Enclosures:

Syllabus SOSC 1440, fall 2023 [identical for SOSC 1449]

Teaching evaluation fall 2023: SOSC 1440 and SOSC 1449