

THE ESSAY AND ITS VIRTUE: ACHIEVING BETTER RESULTS IN TEACHING ECONOMICS USING STUDENT COMPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

The paper is organized around the central theme of writing is learning – such that by using essay exams as well as the traditional longer research essay, the student creates knowledge and, by default, owns the material through language arts over memorization strategy. Part one examines the assessment literature that supports the art of the essay as the best tool to maximize critical learning and retention. Part two presents a case study of student feedback from a collection of exams articulating responses to standard economic principles. Part three offers a recommended curriculum and assessment rubric for the traditional micro and macroeconomics course where writing remains the primary task as well as the principal assessment mechanism. The overarching goal is to emphasize the virtue of writing as the way for students to master economics and, more importantly, to retain what they have learned for years to come.

Economics is a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life; it examines that part of individual and social action which is most closely connected with the attainment and with the use of the material requisites of wellbeing.

-Alfred Marshall, 1890

Key Words: Teaching Economics; Student Composition; Rhetoric; Critical Thinking; Essay Writing; Student Assessment Rubric.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the enduring feedback from students who enter the economics course or series in a traditional MBA program and frequently describe their previous undergraduate economic coursework as unmemorable, overtly difficult, poorly taught, or, most commonly, forgotten. Economics and political science are indeed challenging by their nature as academic disciplines whose scope of study will often cover hundreds of years of history, philosophical inquiry, a wide range of quantitative analysis, human behavior, market analyses from around the world, and the political and financial infrastructures of diverse societies – and the list goes on. Reflecting on my own introductory economics courses in ‘micro and macro,’ I vividly recall Prof. X, who seemed ancient at the time and was indeed the most boring instructor of my education. Perhaps the best memory of all, and the likely inspiration for my own alternative classroom management, was the weekly, dated movie we would watch about economics in the real world – Prof. X slept in the back of the room. To put further insult on the student’s intelligence, the examination process lacked rigorous critical thinking by reverting to standardized scantron exams that tested our ability to memorize the meaningless information delivered over several weeks. Academic malpractice or just plain laziness – the result, the *econ* class for me...forgotten.

Many years and many political and economic courses later attributed to my own graduate training, I am now the professor who remembers my own tribulation with *econ* and the frequency continues as new MBA students enter my class recalling very little – not unusual. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the correction of this phenomenon of student ignorance upon reaching graduate or professional school programs that require economics as a core component to the curriculum. The correction I discuss is the importance of *writing composition* – or simply, the essay as the mechanism to bolster critical thinking and articulation of material studied in class.

The paper is organized around the central theme of *writing is learning* – such that by using essay exams as well as the traditional longer research essay, the student creates knowledge and, by default, owns the material through language arts over memorization strategy. Part one examines the assessment literature that supports the art of the essay as the best tool to maximize critical learning and retention. Part two presents a case study of student feedback from a collection of exams articulating responses to standard economic principles. Part three offers a recommended curriculum and assessment rubric for the traditional micro and macroeconomics course where writing remains the primary task as well as the principal assessment mechanism. The overarching goal is to emphasize the virtue of writing as *the* way for students to master economics and, more importantly, to retain what they have learned for years to come.

2. PART ONE: LEARNING THROUGH LANGUAGE ARTS – MAKING PERMANENT CHANGE

The purpose of the classroom is to inspire students to learn new subjects or to build upon the subject toward mastering a discipline. From my comments in the introduction above, I remember Prof. X primarily because he did not inspire learning, rather, he *told* us information as opposed to instilling knowledge beyond memorization. It is difficult to argue against the philosophical insight attributed to Marshall's quote about economics being a study of humanity's most burning issues – wealth and wellbeing. The economics professor, perhaps more so than many other disciplines, is charged with the responsibility of building upon Marshall's assertion and instigating from her students a connection with the many economics *principles* and their connection to the management of life. I will call this instigation the measurement of success such that the student who is inspired about the *dismal science* has in fact learned the material, and, material that is learned can be applied into daily and lifelong endeavors. The objective here is for the professor to be fully aware of her function not just as 'teacher', but moreover, as 'chief learning instigator'.

Much has been written on how humans learn, retain, and apply knowledge. For the sake of this paper, the ultimate goal of the chief learning instigator is that knowledge becomes the ultimate byproduct of the student's experience from a one-hour lecture to a fifteen-week course through the completion of a degree. Stated differently, learning is the value of exchange from professor to student whereby the strength of the knowledge attained measures the success of the professor's teaching ability – teaching not just facts, or information, but rather inspiring student's to grow in their knowledge. Leading learning theories maintain that "learning is defined as a relatively permanent change in the probability of exhibiting a specific behavior. This change in behavioral potential occurs as a result of experience, either successful or unsuccessful" (Klein, 1989). Indeed, the goal of the economics classroom is to instigate a permanent advancement in understanding big ideas, such as price elasticity, for example, and how mastering this concept not simply for the forthcoming exam, but, more importantly, to understand how to manage price and value from future salary negotiations to pricing your consultation rate or a widget that needs to move from inventory.

The tools to achieve permanent change in our students come in many forms of teaching, evaluating, and classroom management. The argument held here is that one of the more effective tools, if not *the* tool, for instigating and retaining knowledge from students, particularly in the social sciences, is the old fashioned method of writing – or, perhaps it is new-fashioned in that writing remains foreign to many students across the curriculum. I contend from experience as a student and as a professor that writing (which is the applied form of reading) is one of the most effective methods at reaching the goals stated above – to create permanent change – or, simply, advancing student knowledge.

Before we write, we must read. In college I recall reading to find the information to pass the exam. I attended a major university for my undergraduate degree and can remember reading as almost a tertiary experience. In graduate school, the 'book a week' for each class was a tradition that I did my level best to stay on schedule. I noticed many of my student colleagues would eventually revert to reading strategically for the information and not the knowledge. My observations today remain the same where many students read what is necessary to pass their exams. This level of mediocrity brings me to a core issue concerning the essay as a tool for both learning the material and inspiring knowledge. First, we must return to the art of reading which takes time, training, patience, and the will to learn.

There are many ways to read just as there is endless material to read. For the student of economics or more broadly, the social sciences, critical reading is the tactic that is attributed to the goals of attaining knowledge, retaining the material, and, for the sake of this discussion, applying the material through writing. Experts in rhetoric, that is "the use of the best means of persuasion" (Chaffee, et al., 2008, p. 448) suggest that reading actively to decipher the "many layers of the text" produces the critical reader (p. 23). More directly, Chaffee, et al., argue that "as a critical reader [the student] will analyze the text to evaluate its ideas and methods of presenting them. [He] will think of other subjects or issues to which the text might be connected" (p. 26). Supported by specialists in the writing discipline, it is this issue of interconnectedness with 'other subjects' that enables the critical reader to become a critical writer with the overarching aim of learning and applying the knowledge. To summarize, before we embark our students on a writing journey as the measurement of our and their success in the economics classroom,

we must be sure that their reading is active, annotated, recalled, discussed, challenged, and supplemented with robust discussion. Only when reading becomes primary can we then approach the essay as a natural extension of student learning.

Part One is entitled 'learning through language arts' and when we recall the professors of our past or the sages from whom we learned and remember to this day, I can say with confidence that we connect with these teachers because they taught us through writing. Clearly their success is grounded in their passion for their subject matter and that we in fact learned the material – we remember that class because we were challenged intellectually. The great teachers of economics love their discipline and can articulate the complexity of the discipline in clear, persuasive instruction and of course, language. 'Language arts' is more important to the economics teacher than his own knowledge of *principles* and, thus, it is his own rhetoric and his willingness to challenge the students to create rhetoric that results in the learning objective of any discipline. To support my claim on the power of language, I turn to the experts:

Rhetoric, a formal field of study in the Western world since the time of ancient Greece, is the study of how we can use language to understand and influence the beliefs and actions of others...The basic questions that [the] ancient rhetoricians sought to answer are essentially the same matters we study today: the relation of thought to language, language to behavior, and how persuasion occurs...rhetorical theories are tied to value: one's theory of rhetoric is also one's theory of knowledge, self, and society (Gunner and Sweet, 2008, p. 5).

Earlier, I stated that the ultimate responsibility of the economics professor is to assert herself as the 'chief learning instigator'. It seems apparent that once the professor realizes this accountability, the rules of the game must change from teaching 'information' and 'testing' to instigating learning ultimately resulting in the student's attainment of knowledge. If rhetoric, or simply writing, is also connected to one's understanding of 'knowledge, self, and society', we must look closer at how we bring our students into the learning environment of the economics classroom by testing our own general knowledge of self and society. To accomplish this high objective we must reexamine our own curriculum's connection to rhetoric. Some questions to guide this change might include: To what level do we connect economic *principles* to the 'study of mankind' in reference to Marshall's quote? Do we test our students' recall of the *principles* through memorization of facts, or do we enable them to use rhetoric to explain what they have learned? If rhetoric is part of the curriculum, what creative tools do we employ to ensure the material is learned? If the language arts are not a part of our curriculum, what are the alternatives? Lastly, if the language arts are not within our training, what can we do to strengthen these skills and to ensure that we instigate learning?

3. PART TWO: THE ESSAY AND ITS VIRTUE – WRITING IS LEARNING

Recently, I called upon several of my students who demonstrated excellence in my class in both micro and macroeconomics courses within the MBA program to respond to a survey concerning their learning of economics – primarily from me. The graduate program also includes a bachelor's of science in management (BSM) program from which I surveyed students as well. This section of the paper examines my findings from the responses of the survey as well as the implications for future curricula. Before I discuss the feedback from the classroom, I must first explain the nature of the assessment tool – the essay. To help support my argument, I look to experts in psychology, education, and sociology who study how humans learn.

At the conclusion of Part One, I proposed a list of questions for the economics professor to challenge his curriculum's use of rhetorical tools in his teaching and assessment. The last question raises the issue of training that might be required to strengthen his current skill set in ensuring student learning through writing. At the core of this question is a test of the professor's relevance not only to teaching the material at hand, but moreover, his relevance as a 'chief learning instigator'. Just as the professor must remain current in his understanding of the economy and how to apply economic *principles* as an instructor, the student, often paying thousands of dollars per course, must receive the value attributed to the direct and implicit costs of the course. Consensus might agree that the student's ultimate goal in assuming these costs are to attain knowledge and a good understanding of micro/macro econ, etc. as part of the broader portfolio of their education, such as the MBA. The expectation of the student is that the eventual prize, that is the degree/diploma, will enhance their knowledge and certainly, and perhaps more practically, strengthen their competitiveness in the marketplace. To attain this noble objective for the student, our teaching tools and methods are directly correlated to the value of the 'prize' the student attains. Hence, noted by Sternberg on the nature of teaching and assessment, "when we teach only for facts, rather than for how to go beyond facts, we teach students how to get out of date" (2008, p. 21).

So, the big question remains, 'how do we stay current and how do we ensure that our students are current', this coming from Robert Sternberg, professor of psychology and president of the American Psychological Association. Sternberg reaches even further to assert that "wisdom is the most important and yet most neglected aspect of education today" (p. 25). The implication here is that the classroom, no matter what subject, must produce students who can think, articulate ideas and concepts, and apply knowledge. Again, learning facts is merely a small piece of this large puzzle. To fully challenge the student's intellect, therefore, we must discuss the tool that many argue, from Aristotle to Sternberg, is the only method to instigate learning and to ultimately attain knowledge and eventually, to gain wisdom. The essay is the tool.

The traditional economics course might consist of lecture and/or discussion concluded by an assessment of the students understanding of the material in various types of exams. The exams that I have observed from colleagues and others in the profession range from multiple choice, short-answer, essays, take-home exams (generally essays), and a combination of all the above. Additionally, some course platforms allow for and encourage public speaking, research papers/essays, group projects, and other methods beyond the 'exam' as a form of assessing student performance. Let me jump directly to the great challenge of the educator who uses the essay as a major tool for assessment – essays take time to read, indeed an opportunity cost to a professor's day-to-day management of time. Undeniably, shoving 50 scantrons into a machine that calculates the 'answers' to a multiple-choice test offloads the burden of reading and grading. But, what did the students learn by filling in bubbles? Yes, they may have recalled the information, but did they learn, retain, and engage the material? Perhaps they hoped for the best that their memory recall was at its finest for that brief moment called 'exam day'. Indeed, critical thinking does transpire when students approach a set of multiple choice questions – yes, they must understand the material. However, my argument here is that the essay requires both an understanding and a more advanced articulation of their knowledge resulting in a long-term ownership of the material. In Part Three, I propose an assessment rubric to both manage time while also instigating learning.

The central argument here in Part Two is that 'writing is learning' meaning while the lecture and discussion encourages learning and feeds the student the *principles*, student writing is where the learning is strengthened and retained and teaching economics holds value for both professor and student. We attain this successful outcome mostly from essay exams as well as writing research papers. The focus here, however, is on the merit of the essay exam such as the in-class bluebook or the take-home extended essay exam, each of these assessment tools contradicting the assessment objective of the alternative methods such as the short-answer or multiple-choice variety. According to Campbell, Smith, and Brooker regarding the assessment objective of the non-essay versus essay exam,

The essay has long been regarded as both a useful tool and assessment in tertiary education and as a valuable means of promoting conceptual learning which is a prime goal of higher education (p. 449)...While short-answer or multiple choice questions requiring mainly factual recall tend to elicit surface approaches, essays are more likely to encourage a deep approach and hence to promote desired forms of student learning (p. 451).

Further evidence of the essay and its value upon learning is supported by John Trimbur who affirms, "in courses with essay exams, [the student must] recall information, but largely to show what [he] can do with it: how [he] can relate facts, details, examples, and terms" (2008, p. 619). In order to prepare for multiple choice exams, the success often is determined by three factors: the quality of the teaching; the quality of the exam review offered by the professor; and the onus of the student and their comprehensive preparation. The preparation for the essay exam points to these same factors; however, Trimbur adds, "preparing for essay exams amounts to finding the big picture – the main ideas, terminology, controversies, explanations, and conceptual frameworks in a course" (p. 619). Perhaps Edward White's frankness makes the shortcomings of the non-essay test all the more concerning: "the universe of the multiple-choice test is one in which all questions have a single answer, embedded in a series of wrong answers. Where does such an artificial world exist, outside of the testing room?" (1999, p. 34).

A final defensive survey of the essay and its benefits toward instigating learning and attaining knowledge points to the overarching purpose of teaching economics in this case, in a business school – whereby, economics is but one of several components to the education of the *general manager*. The traditional MBA program consists of many courses that survey a wide scope of disciplines including organizational behavior, economics, finance, accounting, marketing, strategy, to cite the core. The business student, like many students within a liberal arts program, is the product of a diverse portfolio of product offerings in the form of a variety of required courses as listed above. The essay enables the student to support her response on a question that asks for a 'discussion of the laws of supply

and demand', for example, by encouraging her to reach into her broader education from experience and other courses beyond economics to more fully develop a real world discussion. No fact-base exam enables this wider focus of learning. From the sociological perspective, Bizzell and Singleton affirm,

Essay questions tell students that it is not only important to know isolated facts and concepts; facts and concepts must be interrelated, placed in a broader perspective, applied to a variety of problems. Essay questions encourage this kind of understanding. At their best, they involve synthesis, integration, and the application of concepts to contexts other than those found in lecture and reading. Therefore, an important reason to give essay exams is that such questions force students to reach out and explore the later implications of what they are studying (1988, p. 177).

According to the experts noted in this paper, a consensus on the value of the essay as a tool for learning appears more favorable than alternative exam methods. Again, other exercises such as application scenarios, research papers (often the extension of the essay exam), and group projects all encourage critical learning and writing beyond memorization. However, the issue at hand is the assessment of the students' overall learning of the material and application of their knowledge. My objective as a teacher has been to learn from what didn't work for me as a student, such as with Prof. X, and design a way of assessing my own students' performance. The evolution to the essay method came from my own learning success in graduate school where writing was the only form of assessment as well as a brief experiment with objective, test bank exams that failed to meet the value add of what students were paying for. The one term that I gave standard exams was a successful teaching event, but the standardized exams, though not uncommon for the student, did not meet the intellectual rigor, fairness, and learning goals of my course. Consequently, I adjusted the exam process from the standardized model to the in-class, bluebook thematic essay exam where students validate their mastery of the *principles* while demonstrating their broader knowledge of applying the concepts into real world scenarios through composition all under the pressure of usually two hours.

As stated at the beginning of Part Two, I surveyed some of my former students who have since graduated with their business degrees, both BSMs and MBAs. The survey was quite informal in its distribution and the sample size was selective to a group of strong performers in my courses. See Appendix A for the sample survey. Below are responses that are helpful certainly to me as the professor to measure the essay assessment tool while also lending support to the general argument of the paper – learning through writing.

Below is a sample of responses from **Question One**: *Comment on the value (or nonvalue) of preparing for the bluebook, in-class exam – how did you prepare differently for timed essays on exam day from previous business school exams?*

3.1 Responses:

Student A: There is great value in using the essay exams. It is a different experience than the usual multiple choice, T/F type of exams which can be very frustrating due to tricky wording or deceptive type sentences, and double negatives. In terms of preparation, I concentrated on my lecture notes mainly, because I sensed that the exam was specifically designed around those points, and not so much every detail in the text. One main benefit to the student is the pre-test review and briefing, usually the week before. In my opinion, the essay test is a true indicator of a person's retention and understanding of the material.

Student B: The exam makes me study at greater depth, comparing to just a casual reading of material.

Student C: I believe that the preparation for the blue book exams differed from the traditional T/F, multiple-choice, in that the essays required a more in depth understanding of the material. In the multiple-choice setting, correct answers may be derived from 'key words' or phrases. In order to answer the essays, there must be a higher level of comprehension that would allow for the individual to expound on concepts and theories of the material. It was not a matter of memorizing and regurgitating fragments of the material but correlating the individual concepts or components and understanding how they affect one another. If the concept was not perfectly clear from the assigned text, I would resource additional materials for an alternative explanation.

Student D: Preparation was very intense. It forced me to learn the topic. The value rests in how much I actually learned by studying, re-reading and writing out concepts. I'll bet if you asked me to take a similar bluebook exam now, I'd do very well with only a little brush-up.

Student E: Preparing for the bluebook exams is where the learning happens. The exam itself is just a reflection of that preparation. To prepare for the exams, I outlined the chapters from the text. Then, I outlined the additional reading. Indeed the essay exam is the superior method. There is no dispute that it is the most difficult and time consuming exam for a student to prepare. But it moderates rote learning strategies while demanding the skill of formulating and articulating a thoughtful response – nearly as important as the material itself.

* * *

As noted above, my sample size was selected, informal, and small – about ten students from the past year were called and they delivered helpful, honest feedback. The responses to both question one and the other questions in the survey resemble the student examples above with a common theme – the essay enabled and required a deeper preparation for the exam with the setting of the exam allowing the student to demonstrate not only the ‘answers’, but, more importantly, their general knowledge of economics. Perhaps my favorite response comes from a student who concluded the survey with the following comments:

Your courses stick out like a sore thumb! They are very different from the other courses in the MBA program. They require people to actually understand theory, do research and write in a meaningful way. Many of the other topics are things that you can practice. For example, if you are studying accounting, you can create a ledger. If you are studying finance, you can do a valuation. With economics, it isn't quite as easy to practice but the topic is far too important to neglect. In my opinion, the students who experience a class structured in this way will be better prepared to deal with business challenges throughout their careers. It is never a mistake to make people think!

As indicated in the survey (Appendix A), additional questions were asked pertaining to the value of the essay and writing in general. For example, certain questions pointed to other writing components in the course such as the major research paper, a comprehensive team analysis of a public company, as well as a ‘handbook’ which resembles a journal or glossary of economic concepts/terms/theories the student creates throughout the term. The feedback from the additional survey questions mirrors the commentaries from the first question – essentially, the overall learning was strengthened through writing fostered by deeper reading of the material, concentrated discussion in class, time management, as well as active and reflective preparation. The subtitle of this section is in fact the main title of the paper – ‘the essay and its virtue’ followed by the goal of the essay itself – ‘writing is learning’. The evidence drawn from the experts on learning discussed above together with the supporting accounts from actual students from my selected survey isn't simply to help bolster my own thesis held in this paper. Moreover, the findings suggest that as professors of economics or other social sciences, our students demand that their intellect be pushed forward and that the tool that matches the rigor of traditional, high-level learning must be designed with composition as the output for student assessment and, ultimately, student learning. Anything else limits the possibility of maximizing our teaching responsibility as well as graduating students to compete vigorously in the knowledge economy of tomorrow.

4. PART THREE: IDEAS FOR ASSESSMENT – ACHIEVING BETTER RESULTS

The challenge for the economics professor is daunting. You must be skilled at communicating complex theory that often is old, not applicable, or just plain wrong. You must also be passionate about the field knowing both the past and present thinkers and be able to bridge the abstract with the real world. You must enjoy teaching and wanting to see the byproduct of your work flourish not in the form of economists, per se, but rather as thinkers with a nifty intellectual, economic tool kit to help them master their ‘wellbeing’ as Marshall asserted. Perhaps no other economist says it best than Keynes on the qualifications for an economist from no other than one of our great, late teachers, Heilbroner:

The study of economics does not seem to require any specialized gifts of an unusually high order. Is it not, intellectually regarded, a very easy subject compared with the higher branches of philosophy or pure science? An easy subject, at which very few excel! The paradox finds its explanation, perhaps, in that the master-economist must possess a rare combination of gifts. He must be mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher – in some degree. He must understand symbols and speak in words. He must contemplate the particular in terms of the general, and touch abstract and concrete in the same flight of thought. He must study the present in the light of the past for the purposes of the future. No part of man's nature or his institutions must lie entirely outside his regard. He must be purposeful and disinterested in a simultaneous mood; as aloof and incorruptible as an artist, yet sometimes as near the earth as a politician (Heilbroner, p. 285).

To reach this noble or perhaps impossible calling espoused by Keynes, we must first understand the relevance of our discipline in the context of the degree to which the student is attaining. In my case, the economics component

of the MBA is a major theoretical building block for the practice of management. Knowing our students also means understanding their shortcomings from day one, both in economics but also in their abilities as communicators of ideas – primarily through their writing skills.

The purpose of Part Three is to offer insight on teaching economics through composition and ultimately, to achieve better results. First, some clarifications and assumptions are in order before I present a tested rubric. The general assumption is that the reader might be in the position of having graduate students who at one time in the past have taken an economics course at a junior college or earlier in their academic training. It is also quite possible as well for your course to be the first and last econ class of their lifetime. Other assumptions point to the fact that most students are not training to be economists and that the course they are taking is part of a larger collection in their portfolio – as in the MBA. A final assumption is that most students will have limited to mediocre writing abilities – even the adult learner. Consequently, a writing curriculum must be built into the syllabus to allow for student composition to begin, sometimes from scratch. The writing components of the course, in this case the bulk of the assessments, need to be progressive thus starting small, with assignments that might address text-related questions found at the end of a chapter or short writing responses to broader questions within the context of the material in the syllabus all leading to the major essay exam culminating, in my case, with a major research paper and conference-like presentation by the student-author.

The tested rubric identified from the survey of my students noted above can be customized and implemented in any economics or social science course – micro, macro, elective, intro, or advanced. Following is a condensed framework:

- Classroom – reading, lecture/discussion, scenarios
- Homework – reading, *principles* application, responsive writing
- Exam – thematic questions, expository, quantitative and qualitative
- Paper – major research paper, theoretical and applicative, oral and written
- Team Project – collaborative economic analysis, oral and written

Indeed, all course designs are dependent on the length of the term; however, the above combination of assessment tools can be applied in a 2-unit to 4-unit course. Certainly, endless creative teaching methods have promise – this model has worked with the goal of attaining ‘better results’ primarily through composition as the central learning activity. It is often said that we measure success by measuring results. Results in the case of assessing our students is seen from the progression of their writing (i.e., their general knowledge) as opposed to only seeing their progress calculated in a numerical tally determined from a scantron.

To illustrate the content of the exam rubric, below is a simple question on ‘supply and demand’. The exam question is among five other themes studied up to the midpoint of the term in which the student has two hours to write her answer to all five questions in a large, traditional bluebook leaving the student with nothing but her mind, a pen, and a blank page. Included on the exam sheet containing the essay questions are the following instructions:

Please answer each question as thoroughly as possible, providing rich detail from our lectures, readings, and discussions as well as enhancing your answers with graphical analysis where applicable. The organization of your answers, the complexity of your analysis, and the clarity of your critical thinking are the key elements of your evaluation.

The total value of this exam is 20% of the course grade. Each question is worth a total of 20 points. You have two hours to complete the exam.

Immediately following the instructions is the set of questions:

On Supply and Demand – Basic economic theory rests on an understanding of traditional supply and demand. Explain the meaning of the laws of supply and demand and provide a graphical illustration and scenario to help support your response. How does the concept of *elasticity* help explain the nature of these central laws?

As noted by the students in the survey, the preparation for such a question requires not only a strong understanding of, in this case, *supply and demand*, but it expects the students to articulate their broader knowledge of the theory, its model, as well as its real world application. Essentially, the student is using expository writing to demonstrate their knowledge and, most importantly, to certify what they have learned. As Irmscher contends, “expository writing...is writing that explains” (1979, p. 1). It is the expository technique that I find the most useful assessment for students to demonstrate their skills as the ‘explanations’ they pour out onto the page are really illustrations of their mind at work. The answer to the exam question is a pure reflection of both their understanding of say, supply

and demand, and, more importantly, the display on the page offers a window into the student's mind, customs, intellect, illustrative skill, articulation, sophistication, and, in essence, their general knowledge. Unlike the short-answer or multiple-choice exam, the essay pushes the student to draw from all of his range of experience and liberates him to discuss and explain what he knows. This liberation is where I contend the greatest learning occurs such that risks are taken more fervently because the broader knowledge bank serves his responses to the questions versus the alternative of negotiating between a, b, c, or d. Indeed, the essay exam must have clear preparation, guidelines, and trust between the professor and student body – the student must know the scoring value for which he is writing, exam taking guidelines or policies must be clear, and trust must be instilled between the professor and student to ensure that what is presented on the page is assessing what they know as opposed to where they might fall short.

Additional emphasis is placed on the clarity of grading policies to support the integrity of the exam and its intent. First, grading policies must enable the professor to again, clearly state the value of the questions to in essence, quantify the often criticized subjective nature of the essay exam. I provide a scale below to illustrate a scoring technique. Second, the grading policy must clearly be communicated to the student as to how the professor will actual evaluate her work. For example, in the case of the question on supply and demand, each question has a total value of 20 points equaling 100% of the value of the question. (See Appendix B for sample grading criteria worksheet). A common grading scenario might score a question as 19/20 signifying 95% of the value has been attained. Students universally understand percentages and, thus the 19/20 has validity. Third, the clarity of the grading policies must also enable the professor to grade efficiently, fairly, and quickly. Quantifying the value is a tested way that several years of scoring have produced hundreds of exams with few if any grade challenges. When grading criteria, values, and policies are clear, coupled with in-class pre-exam exercises, and, most importantly, a clear and fair exam review, the student can study confidently, intensely, and more intellectually. When it comes to exam day there should be no ambiguity as to the content, rules, and consequences of the major essay exam. Likewise, when the exams are returned in a timely fashion to the students, the scores should be a clear reflection of their preparation, their knowledge, and the professor's objective evaluation.

To support my argument, Imscher provides helpful insight on how to evaluate the expository essay. He argues,

Evaluation obviously implies values, but many teachers evaluate without defining them or just feel frustrated because they can't quantify the values they hold. Without clearly defined values, it is impossible to make consistent judgments and discriminations. And it is better yet if we can verbalize them so that the commenting and grading do not seem personal with reference to objective criteria (p. 142)...values such as informativeness, supportability, clarity, soundness, and relevance can be explained to the students and illustrated. The value of an idea is not totally subjective (p. 146).

I regularly remind my students that there is always a culminating event in which I make the difficult, but fair decision of putting a final score as well as commentary on their work. Grading is a function of teaching, just as reading is a function of writing. Zak and Weaver simplify the importance of assessment whereby, "grading is something we must all participate in because it is the currency of schools" (1988, p. 163). I would also add that grading is where we administer trust, affirmation, integrity, credibility, sincerity, and, most importantly, instigation of learning.

In summary, the ideas held in Part Three are based on personal experience of trial and error and has played a heavy role in shaping a curriculum that has achieved 'better results'. What do I mean by 'better'? Like all students, we base our first time in the discipline as the benchmark. Prof X was my first taste of economics as well as an ineffective teaching style coupled with futile assessment tools. My goal as the professor has been to instigate learning and to ensure that the students' and my own investment in the classroom is met with satisfaction of learning and knowledge that is retained and, most importantly, can be applied in years to come. From the sample of my own students' evaluation of their learning experience together with expertise from writing and learning scholars, the rubric presented here using the essay as a central learning tool is meant primarily to challenge professors in the discipline not necessarily to adapt the essay, but rather to reflect on their own assessment methodology. The simple question we must all answer is, 'are they learning and, if so, can their knowledge transfer beyond the classroom?'

5. CONCLUSION

The inspiration to write this paper comes from my own experience as a student – yes, with Prof. X and indeed, many others like him. I was always aware of the mediocre classroom and the substandard teaching together with the default assessment processes. Attending a teaching seminar not long ago, one of the panelists, a professor of

law, indicated that he never was taught how to teach, rather, as for most college professors, he learned a discipline, knew he had a love of learning, and said, 'hey, I think I'd like to teach'. For countless professors, the teaching profession is part of their personality and their soul; however, for countless other professors, the spark often fades, or their relevance begins to diminish, or their tools start to dull. Perhaps the most important element of the professor's demise is that she fails to communicate the most basic essentials for the successful classroom: the utility of the material itself for the student's portfolio; the rules of assessment; and the skills to approach the lessons at hand. The central argument presented here is that 'writing is learning' and, consequently, produces results that strengthen the students' learning while also challenging and rewarding the professor to account for the learning in their students' own ideas through words.

I approach this subject with humility and risk knowing that my audience might have in fact been my teacher, or is struggling in some way with their own teaching effectiveness, or, more directly, might justifiably disagree with my teaching method altogether. At the surface, my goal has been to defend my argument that the art of the essay is the best tool to maximize critical learning and retention supported by scholars of learning and writing who also affirm my thesis. Additionally, my intent was to get further into the mind of my own students by targeting related questions to assess their first-hand experience at taking my economics courses where writing is the primary learning and assessment tool. Lastly, my objective has been to offer a rubric for consideration for use or customization in other social science classrooms as well. At the center of the project, however, has been the foremost aim of generating a lasting dialogue about the nature of teaching economics. Questions that might engage such an intellectual discussion include: Are my students learning? Are they retaining? And, are they using economics as a tool for their future? Returning to Marshall, he reminds us that economics is the study of the 'ordinary business of life'. If we are to be effective teachers of the discipline, the final question we must address in our dialogue pertains to Marshall's ultimate affirmation on the discipline – is our classroom a place where not only *principles* are mastered, but, more urgently, are these *principles* in alignment with managing our students' *wellbeing*? I affirm that writing is the way to capture the essence of teaching and learning economics and that through composition, the rewards are simple, yet profound – *better results*.

APPENDIX A

Research Survey on *Teaching Economics and the Virtue of the Essay*

Objective

The following survey is meant to obtain feedback on the course(s) you took in your undergraduate and graduate courses in business school in the social sciences – particularly, the discipline of economics. Recall that your course, whether in micro or macroeconomics, included the following writing assignments: two in-class bluebook exams, a major research paper, a team project, and a personal economic handbook (glossary of terms). Your contribution to this research is very valuable as your comments will provide direct insight into the continuous improvement of teaching what is often called the *dismal science*.

Instructions

Take a moment and reflect on your experience in your micro and/or macro course and address the questions below to the best of your ability.

Questions

1. *On the Exams*
 - a. Comment on the value (or nonvalue) of *preparing* for the bluebook, in-class exam – how did you prepare differently for timed essays on exam day from previous business school exams?
 - b. How might a standardized/objective exam have impacted your overall learning of the material? For example, true/false, multiple choice, short answer.
 - c. Comment on the value (or nonvalue) of *taking* the in-class, bluebook exam – more specifically, describe how the exam experience (those two hours) impacted your overall performance in learning economics. Feel free to offer as much insight here as possible.
2. *On the Research Paper*
 - a. How did the research process impact your learning of economics?
 - b. Comment on the value (or nonvalue) of researching and writing on a topic of your choice – what did you learn most from the overall experience from writing your paper?

- c. Comment on the value (or nonvalue) of presenting your paper at our *student conference* – how did this experience impact your overall learning of economics?
3. *On the Team Project*
 - a. Comment on the value (or nonvalue) of working with your peers on a team, economics project.
 - b. How did the team project impact your overall learning of economics?
 - c. Comment on the writing component of the team project – in what ways did group writing impact your learning of the material?
4. *On the Economics Handbook*
 - a. Comment on the value (or nonvalue) of composing the handbook throughout the term.
 - b. How did the handbook help (or not help) your overall learning of economics?
 - c. Do you still have your handbook?
5. *On General Feedback*
 - a. Has your general interest of economics changed/improved/diminished since your last class in business school?
 - b. Has your writing changed/improved/diminished since your last class in business school?
 - c. Has your economics foundation prepared you to tackle your post graduation professional/entrepreneurial/academic opportunities you are currently engaged?
 - d. Provide any final comments you wish with regards to your experience in learning economics – the page is yours.

APPENDIX B

Sample Grading Criteria – for the students

The following criteria are used to evaluate your work based on a 20/20 metric for each of the five exam questions – the summation of the total individual scores reflects your final exam grade.

18/20 – 20/20 ('A' range)

1. Clearly and completely responds to the question, demonstrating sophisticated critical analysis
2. Contains a clear and specific introduction
3. Uses clear focused arguments, supported by evidence, with appropriate citations
4. May offer unique arguments or analysis that others missed
5. Is well organized with few errors in sentence structure, spelling and mechanics
6. Incorporates complex sentences and smooth transitions, moderate to high thought-per-sentence and paragraph counts, as well as specific arguments from the applicable reading assignments
7. Provides sophisticated quantitative and graphical analysis

16/20 – 17/20 ('B' range)

1. Adequately responds to the question but at a less sophisticated level
2. Has a clear introduction, but is clearly weaker than the 'A'
3. Advances solid arguments and supplies adequate evidence or examples for each question
4. Is clear and generally well written, with few errors, proper citations
5. May gloss over important points or generalize where a more specific analysis is expected
6. Provides standard quantitative and graphical analysis is

14/20 – 15/20 ('C' range)

1. Answers the question, but lacks depth of coverage and analysis
2. Meets some of the essential criteria from above, but skims the surface
3. Is vague or broad, lacks evidence from the readings and discussions
4. Provides a mix of inaccuracies and incorrect answers
5. Minimal to no evidence of quantitative and graphical analysis

We'll stop at the 'C' range – most graduate students are aligned within the top two tiers.

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