

LET’S MAKE A MOVIE! – INTRODUCING ECONOMICS WITH A MULTIMEDIA RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract: In this paper, we describe the use of a multimedia research assignment to introduce first year undergraduates to economics. Small groups of students were asked to create a video or podcast featuring a social scientist and their connection to the theme, “Capitalism, Growth and Inequality”. The assignment, named the “First Year Challenge” (FYC), immersed students into independent but collaborative research at the start of their university life. It introduced students to economics in a contextual way and gave them a chance to connect with their peers and the world around them. This paper reports the implementation and evaluation of the assignment. While the content of the FYC is quite subject specific, we believe that it can easily be adapted to other contexts and programmes. We discuss in detail how to tailor this assignment to other subjects or fields of economics and to other contexts. The feedback from students and tutors implies that the benefits of a project like this transcend the specific content and therefore the FYC can be used more widely as a research-based introduction to any subject.

KEYWORDS: Economics Education, Introductory Economics, Multimedia, Group Work

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Universities increasingly highlight the importance of research-based education, while the education literature shows the effectiveness of exposing students to independent research. For example, Bauer and Bennet (2003) find that those who had undergraduate research experience report higher levels of satisfaction with their education as well as greater development of cognitive and personal skills. Bergerman et al (1998) show that student-faculty research partnerships promote the retention of students, in particular, those with a higher attrition risk. But in practice, the leap from solving problem sets to doing original research remains difficult. In this paper, we describe and evaluate a unique assignment, called the First Year Challenge, designed to introduce first year undergraduate students to economics through independent research and to encourage collaboration among a diverse set of peers who bring a variety of skills into the classroom.

The assignment required small groups of students to create a brief video or podcast on the theme “Capitalism, Growth and Inequality”. Students started on the project as soon as they arrived at university, and before attending their first university classes. This meant that their first experience of university economics was through asking questions for their own research rather than just through passively listening to the lecturer. The assignment itself was defined in a fairly broad way, which meant that the students’ first task was to frame a research question that could be answered in satisfactory way with a three-minute multimedia file. We found that students did indeed ask interesting questions, both in the context of the project, but also in the ensuing lectures and tutorials. We also found that while the research project only had a general link to the first year economics curriculum and did not contribute towards the final grade, students put in a fair amount of effort and produced high-quality output in a relatively short period of time and with a minimum of guidance. Finally, the project appeared to help students interact with their peers and improve their ability to collaborate, which we saw as a major goal of the assignment.

We have large cohorts comprising students from all over the world and find that many students go through their time at university never having spoken with many of their classmates. The fact that the university is situated in the middle of London, one of the great metropolises of the world makes it even harder for our students to form links with others as there are many distractions and it is difficult to find suitable meeting places. In a time when connectedness is on the agenda everywhere, this feels like an anomaly and a wasted opportunity. After all, the purpose of the university should be to facilitate a meeting of minds. From a more practical point of view, employers view the ability to collaborate with different types of people and to work as a team as an essential attribute of a successful employee; however, they often report that recent university graduates lack these skills.

The First Year Challenge can be viewed as a curricular version of the pre-orientation activities that many American universities organize for their first year undergraduates. For example, Dartmouth College Outing Club organizes optional overnight trips for incoming first years as a way for them to get to know their peers. Yale’s Freshman Outdoor Orientation Trips have a similar motivation. The First Year Challenge is a way of linking this kind of

bonding exercise with the pedagogic goal of introducing future economists to the broad scope of questions put forward by social scientists. The aim was for students to start interacting with each other through the lens of the project, and continue to collaborate and participate in peer learning throughout the year. We found that while many students interacted with others in the context of sporting or other extracurricular activities, they didn't have much experience of doing so in an academic or professional context. The FYC was a chance to introduce them to group work in a curricular setting, an experience which should be quite valuable for future employment contexts.

SECTION 2: RELATED LITERATURE

As noted earlier, there were two main motivations behind the First Year Challenge. The first was the desire to immerse undergraduate students in academic research from the first day of their university lives, even before they had had their first lectures. The second was to encourage interaction amongst students and to facilitate peer learning. The benefits of both these aspects of a university education are widely recognized. Russell, Hancock and McCullough (2007) find that participation in undergraduate research projects increases awareness, confidence and understanding. It also increased students' interest in the field and in pursuing further study (including a PhD). Bergerman et al (1998) find that involving students in research as a way to involve them in the "core academic mission of the university" improves the rates of degree completion, particularly of vulnerable students. Finally Healey and Jenkins (2009) provide an overview of undergraduate research initiatives across several countries and conclude that exposure to and participation in such programmes increases student engagement and ownership of the learning process.

The benefits of group-based or collaborative learning are also well documented. Springer et al (2006) provide a meta-analysis to show that small-group learning is effective in promoting greater academic achievement, more favourable attitudes toward learning, and increased rates of programme completion. The literature on team-based learning, e.g. Michaelsen and Sweet (2011), is extensive and shows how working collaboratively is not just beneficial for the students' academic experience, it also equips them with invaluable skills for the workplace.

SECTION 3: DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

3.1 SETUP

The FYC started, in effect, before students arrived at university in September. An email with the details of the assignment was sent out to students a week before their arrival so that they could familiarise themselves with the task. Once at university, the first step in the project was to meet other group members at an assigned location within a half hour radius of the Economics department. The groups were set up according to pre-assigned tutorial groups (large group lectures in the economics department are accompanied by small group tutorials comprising about 15 students each), which in turn were set up based on the students' other timetabled courses and activities. As the bulk of first year courses are mandatory in economics, the assignment to a tutorial group ended up being more or less random.

Students were given instructions² and a photo of the meeting point, and asked to make their way to the location independently. Once at the location, they were asked to introduce themselves to their fellow group members, exchange contact information and divide themselves into two subgroups of 7-8 students each. Then the groups had to figure out which thinker from a given shortlist their location was linked to. Some location-thinker links were straightforward, e.g. Charles Dickens' house on Doughty Street, or Florence Nightingale's workplace on Harley Street. Others were more challenging, like the library at the London School of Economics, which was linked to the founders of the School, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, but also housed many materials related to the project theme. The British Library, which contained some of Adam Smith's original manuscript, was another intriguing link as it also contained many exhibits that related to other thinkers on the list. While we had specific links in mind, students could come up with different thinker-location combinations, as long as they made sense and were clearly explained.

Once the sub-groups were set up and the relevant thinkers had been identified, students were asked to brainstorm the link between the thinker and the central theme of the introductory unit in their first year text, *The Economy*³. The fairly broad theme "capitalism, growth and inequality" gave students the opportunity to be creative and define the focus of their project themselves. The project output had to be a 3 minute video or podcast, and students were explicitly directed not to dwell on the thinker's biography, but to focus on their link to the theme. Here again, the difficulty of the task varied. Some thinkers like Keynes or Marx had fairly straightforward links to the theme, while others like Charles Babbage required far more thought. Still others like Francis Bacon both had a non-trivial link to the theme, and had put forward ideas that were fairly complex, at least from a first year undergraduate's perspective. In the final evaluation of the output, consideration was given to the degree of difficulty involved in linking the thinker to the theme.

Over the next five weeks, students were encouraged to meet up in their sub-groups to discuss the project, do research and start producing their media. Within each larger group, the two sub-groups worked on the same thinker, but had to choose a different aspect of the project to work on and could work in a different medium. Apart from a few encouraging words and clarifying statements, lecturer involvement in the process was minimal. While students were working on their projects, lectures had started and students had discussed the theme of the project (the content of Unit 1 in the text) in lectures and tutorials. This discussion did not focus on any of the social thinkers per se, but did talk about the theme in more general terms. The module proceeded at a rate of roughly one unit per week, so as the students were working on their projects, the content of the lectures moved onto other topics. At the end of the five weeks, each sub-group submitted their project in an online drop box.

After submissions were completed, the lecturers evaluated the projects on the basis of content, exposition and the degree of difficulty of the assigned meeting point or thinker. The main focus of the content was on the link between the thinker and the theme. For example, a

² The full text of the student handout is in the Appendix.

³ *The Economy* is the free online textbook produced by the CORE Econ project (can be accessed at <http://www.core-econ.org/>). The first year introductory module is based on this text.

project on Mahatma Gandhi received more credit for discussing his ideas about small-scale production and its link to reducing poverty and inequality, than for discussing his life history and India's freedom struggle. A project on Francis Galton scored highly for referring to his work on correlation and regression (which facilitated the empirical study of growth and inequality and the factors that affect them), rather than for highlighting his interest in eugenics. We announced a shortlist of top performing projects, two runners-up and two winners at the end of the evaluation process. The students in the winning groups each received an Amazon voucher for a token amount, and all the projects on the shortlist were showcased in an Undergraduate Economics Research conference at the end of the year.

3.2 GROUP MAKEUP

The FYC was introduced to students in the week before their university classes began, in part, so that they could use the group project to connect with other students who were also new to the city and the university. There were 274 first year undergraduates in the 2014-15 cohort. Of these 173 (63%) were men and 172 (63%) were domiciled in the UK or the rest of the EU. 223 students (82%) were specializing in Economics, while 6 were from the European Studies department, 7 were from the Bachelor of Arts and Sciences (BASc, a liberal arts type programme). We also had 18 students from Geography, and the remaining 18 were from Philosophy. Those from a department other than Economics were studying for a joint degree (e.g. Economics and Geography) which has a required Economics element.

The majority of the economics students were studying for a three year undergraduate degree. 25 economics students were studying for a four year degree, with the additional year being spent abroad (usually at a US university). All students enter the programme with a fairly high level of mathematics preparation as this is a condition of the admission offer, and those with A-levels (the majority of the group) are expected to have A's in three subjects. The student body is therefore academically quite well-prepared. However, it is also true that because of the structure of the schooling system, they have had little experience in independent research or writing extensively. One of the main motivations of the FYC was to add this skill, in addition to the ability to work collaboratively, to the students' arsenal.

As noted earlier, the FYC groups were constructed on the basis of tutorial groups, however, the sub-groups for the FYC were decided on by the students themselves. Table 1 below summarizes some of the characteristics of the tutorial groups. Each group consisted of 12 to 15 students. The joint degree students were placed in groups separate from the Economics students, and these groups therefore are identified by the home department. One group (TUTM) contained students from more than one home department, and is therefore identified as "Joint Degree". There was diversity both between and within the groups. The proportion of female students ranged from just over 20% to 50%, while the proportion of overseas students varied from about 8% to over 65%. The joint degree groups had significantly fewer overseas students, but the variation in the female-to-male ratio was similar.

GROUP	SIZE	FEMALE	OVERSEAS	DEPARTMENT	FYC OUTCOME
TUTA	14	4	7	ECONOMICS	--
TUTB	14	7	8	ECONOMICS	RUNNER-UP
TUTC	12	7	0	BASC	--
TUTD	14	3	5	ECONOMICS	SHORTLIST
TUTE	14	4	8	ECONOMICS	--
TUTF	15	7	6	ECONOMICS	RUNNER-UP
TUTH	14	5	2	GEOGRAPHY	--
TUTJ	13	6	6	ECONOMICS	--
TUTK	13	4	3	ECONOMICS	BOTH SHORTLISTED
TUTL	14	4	3	PHILOSOPHY	WINNER/SHORTLIST
TUTM	13	5	1	JOINT DEGREE	SHORTLIST
TUTN	14	3	6	ECONOMICS	--
TUTP	14	4	5	ECONOMICS	SHORTLIST
TUTQ	15	8	5	ECONOMICS	--
TUTR	15	5	5	ECONOMICS	--
TUTT	11	6	4	ECONOMICS	SHORTLIST
TUTU	13	6	6	ECONOMICS	WINNER/SHORTLIST
TUTV	12	3	6	ECONOMICS	--
TUTW	15	5	10	ECONOMICS	SHORTLIST
TUTX	15	5	6	ECONOMICS	--

Table 1: Group Characteristics and Outcomes

3.3 PROJECT OUTPUT

Overall, the quality of the output from the First Year Challenge was very high. Students had clearly done quite a bit of research, gauged the scope of the project fairly well, and in many instances, showed a very high level of skill in putting together the digital media. In most cases the content was well thought out and students engaged in a serious research. Students often used understanding of economics acquired through a high school class or using popular media. The more standard thinkers like Keynes or Ricardo were more likely to receive this treatment. Strong contributions focused on a very precise aspect of the social thinker and researched this in detail. For example, the submission on Florence Nightingale discussed both her work as a statistician as well as her role as a fore-bearer of a universal health care system. There were very few requests for technical or other assistance sent to the lecturers, though some students did take the help of fellow students specializing in film or media to shoot their videos or record their podcasts.

There were a variety of approaches on display in the submissions. Several groups used software like VideoScribe to tell an animated story. One group used a time lapse video of one of the busiest parts of the city with a voiceover. Two groups interviewed the general public on their views about the thinker and his or her work and its relevance today. Given that this project took place in the run-up to a general election year, this provided a fascinating insight into what a layperson today thinks about capitalism, growth and inequality in general and about the role that institutions like the welfare state play in today's economy. Other formats included a faux interview with the thinker, and a short audio play about another set of

thinkers. Many groups also used more traditional approaches like presenting with a whiteboard, taking turns reading from a script, and using a video software to build a PowerPoint like presentation with standard economic diagrams.

The main shortcoming in the submissions in terms of research quality was the lack of proper citation. Wikipedia appeared to be a top source for students, however even this was often not cited properly. Academic or print sources fared worse. This is something that cropped up in written assignments later in the year to a lesser extent, but for the videos in particular, web-based and other material was used extensively but rarely given credit in an adequate fashion. Many groups also did not include their own names in their projects. It seems clear that students view a multimedia project quite differently from a written assignment, and so miss out many things in the former that they would automatically include in the latter. As students did not receive any credit towards their final grade in the module for this project and given that the only incentives were the possible showcasing of the contribution at a conference and a small token for the winner, it is perhaps not surprising that students were not as careful with the details of the submission as they would have been for a graded project. But even in the absence of a proper incentive structure, what was surprising and encouraging from the teachers' perspective was the amount of effort that had clearly been put in.

SECTION 4: EVALUATING THE FYC

The FYC projects were carried out within sub-groups of the tutorial groups described in Section 3.2. These sub-groups were decided upon by the students themselves, and the level of interaction between sub-groups was not observed by the lecturers or tutors. In this section, we start with a brief discussion of the characteristics of groups with the best contributions. As the numbers are small and it is hard to observe the workings inside each group, we present these numbers as rough indications rather than a formal analysis.

4.1 GROUP CHARACTERISTICS AND FYC OUTCOMES

The ranking of the FYC submissions was carried out as described in section 3.3, with credit for particularly difficult subjects as well as for content and the overall quality of the product. There were two overall winners and two runners-up announced, and a shortlist of honourable mentions. The last column of Table 1 identifies groups according to whether their subgroups were in any of these categories. 11 of the 20 tutorial groups had at least one shortlisted (or winning or runner-up) submission.

Table 2 shows group characteristics of the tutorial groups – rather than of the sub-groups - by the category of their FYC outcome (winner, runner up, shortlist, or none). As noted earlier, the assignment to a tutorial group (of about 15 students) is more or less random, while the division of the sub-groups is something that students decided on themselves. The analysis below is at the level of the group rather than the sub-group and therefore at the level where assignment was random. This makes the interpretation of the observed associations slightly stronger. Also, since the tutorial group met every week for class, it is possible that there was discussion about the FYC and cross-sub group sharing of resources and ideas. This makes the group-level analysis all the more informative.

CATEGORY	FEMALE%	OVERSEAS%	HOME DEPARTMENT ECONOMICS?
AT LEAST ONE			
SHORLISTED/WINNING/RUNNER-UP	37.85 (1.08)	37.00 (2.68)	8/10
WINNING OR RUNNER-UP	42.85 (0.70)	41.18 (1.68)	3/4
NONE SHORTLISTED	36.38 (1.51)	36.71 (2.46)	8/10

Table 2: Group characteristics by FYC outcome category (variances in parentheses)

Table 2 shows that in terms of gender, nationality or home department, there was not much difference between the groups that had at least one shortlisted (or winning/runner up) submission and those that had none. However, there does seem to be quite a bit of difference between the groups that had a winner or a runner-up and those that had none shortlisted, winning or runner-up. The former have a higher than average proportion of female students, and of overseas students. These groups are also slightly less likely to be Economics students.

This last observation is interesting as there are two opposing possibilities for how the home department effect might work. On the one hand, students studying philosophy at university are probably more likely than those studying economics to have had experience in independent thinking or research and collaborative work. This is likely both because of their school work (mathematics is required of economics students entering university, and at the school level, is less likely to involve collaboration or research), and because of self-selection of students into the two departments. Students preferring more technical and less essay-based work are more likely to choose economics, while those favouring more discursive work are more likely to choose a joint degree. So it might have been expected that the students taking philosophy (or joint degree in general) would do a better job at the FYC compared to the average economics student. On the other hand, as many of the economics students have studied economics at high school, compared to them, the non-economists might have found it harder to approach an economics project.

Table 2 also shows that the winning groups were more likely to have women and overseas students. This is consistent with the idea that women perform better at the kind of non-linear thinking that was required in the FYC, and the idea that women are better at collaborating. The overseas student effect however goes the other way. Anecdotal evidence shows that overseas students are often quieter in class and less likely to contribute to group discussions, either for cultural or language reasons. They are also more likely to be from an educational background that does not provide much opportunity for creative and collaborative work. One way to explain this finding is that either students specialized within the groups with one set of students performing the technical tasks while others developed content. Another possibility is that if there was a large enough number of overseas students, the subgroups were formed in such a way that students from a particular country could work together, perhaps in their own language. A final possibility is that if there are a large number of overseas students in a subgroup and they are unused to work of this kind, they might leave much of the work to the couple of (domestic) students who are willing to take on the leadership of the group.

4.2 STUDENT FEEDBACK

We measured the success of the First Year Challenge project in several different ways. The first method, discussed in Section 3.2, was the quality of the media output produced. The second was in terms of student participation. One interesting feature of this assignment was that since many groups opted to do a video with either their physical presence or voiceovers, it was easy to see who had participated in the making of the end product. Based on this evidence, it appeared that most groups at least at the end had everyone contributing in one way or another. The last method, discussed in this section, is student feedback. This was collected mostly in terms of anonymous surveys and focus groups. Both instruments asked students about their experience while engaging in the FYC. Specific members of high-performing groups were also asked for their responses to a set of fairly factual questions such as whom they approached for technical help. This last set of responses was not anonymous.

Most students reacted positively to the FYC assignment. The majority turned up at the assigned location during the first week, and participated in some way in the making of the media file. According to the survey and the focus group, students felt that the best thing about the FYC was the fact that they were able to get to know their peers:

I like that the groups for the First Year Challenge were made up of our ... tutorial groups - this meant that we could get to know each other a lot better, improving our experiences in ... tutorial classes too, as we felt more free to contribute and intellectually challenge each other.

The FYC is a good opportunity for us to get to know our friends better, especially for people not from the UK.

It was instructive that the first benefit students thought of was the group connectivity, and even those who mentioned other positives did so after they had talked about getting to know each other. Several did however comment mainly on the content and structure of the assignment:

I enjoyed researching the person and making connections to the curriculum. Trying to link a person to a location was interesting and the fact that you had to travel to a location made the project more interactive.

I enjoyed working on the First Year Challenge and being given the opportunity to be able to choose the particular focus of the task given the thinker to which we were assigned. We could choose to work on something that we were interested in, as opposed to something we could feel we were obliged to do.

The main drawback that most students highlighted was the possibility of free riding:

As with any group project, some people do nothing but it is to be expected.

... It was difficult to make sure everyone attended meetings and work on the project. So there was not ... equal effort from everyone in the group and I think this was

because the project didn't count towards our final grade and we weren't told what the prize for this project was.

A few people also commented on the fact that the assignment could have been completed with a tighter deadline, and it might, in fact, have been easier to keep group members engaged in a shorter timeframe.

I think the deadline could've been earlier - the entire could've been done in 2 weeks. We just left it to the final few days.

The project itself doesn't take too long to finish, but because you gave us so long to do it and there isn't even a real reward/consequence, most people didn't bother. Having a time pressured deadline and a more tangible reward would have been better.

Overall student feedback signals that the project was positively received and that students understood the aims of the project but that there may be scope for some mostly minor improvements.

SECTION 5: ADAPTING THE FYC TO OTHER CONTEXTS

Because the structure of the FYC is fairly flexible and the theme fairly broad, we think that it can be adapted easily to many contexts quite different from our original one. In this section, we suggest ways to do so. It is worthwhile noting that this project could potentially be applied to fields other than economics, as well as to higher levels of economics courses (such as field courses) or at the school level. The three main elements of the FYC that we think are essential are (1) the collaborative aspect which facilitates group work skills important at later stages in students' careers, (2) the multimedia format which encourages non-linear thinking, and (3) the starting point at an early stage of the term, before students are set in their ways of thinking about the subject or are too influenced by the lecturer's or the textbook's views. Keeping these elements in mind, we discuss below how the FYC can be adapted to different contexts

5.1. THE CHALLENGE IN A NON-METROPOLITAN CONTEXT

The most obvious question is probably about how to find relevant locations in a setting that is not a global metropolis with a prominent place in the history of intellectual thought. If one sticks with the assigned text and the general theme of "Capitalism, growth and inequality", it is quite straightforward to extend it to a typical university campus. For example, possible locations could include the business school (the finance department could lend itself to a project on the role of global capital in the rise of the present economic system), the art department (students could look at the market for art in a capitalist system versus a pre-capitalist system) and the sports field (a potential question could address how the capitalist system has facilitated the rise of superstars and therefore inequality). Other departments like the medical school (especially the epidemiology department, useful in studying the role of the eradication of disease in the rise of capitalism), the sociology department (how do other social sciences study inequality) or the English department (how does the media or literature view inequality) are also excellent potential locations for FYC-style projects. In addition to

this, locations like campus stores, banks, local schools, recreation grounds, and the post office can all be used as examples of institutions that play an important role in an economic system. For our context, we used a biological sciences building (conveniently named after Charles Darwin) as one of our locations. The 2015-16 version of our FYC uses a local post office, a state school, a trade union office and a chain grocery store as assigned locations.

5.2 THE CHALLENGE FOR OTHER MORE STANDARD INTRODUCTORY ECONOMICS COURSES

Applying this assignment to a standard introductory economics book is straightforward. Many “Introduction to Economics” textbooks start with a section or a chapter on “What is Economics”. This is an ideal topic for a project similar to ours, as it is both broad enough for students to define their project in their own way, but also closely linked to the curriculum. We found that, throughout the first year, many of our students struggled with the question of what was and wasn’t economics. Those who had studied economics at school were quick to label some of our material as history or sociology or political science. This provided an ideal opportunity to reiterate two points – first, that economics is one among many social sciences, and second that what distinguishes economics from other social sciences are the methods used rather than the topics. A lecturer could easily use some of the university locations listed above to facilitate this project. Other locations might include a local shop, a large chain store, a government office, a non-profit organization, or a school.

5.3 THE CHALLENGE AND FIELD COURSES IN ECONOMICS

We feel that this project works best for introducing a subject. The FYC could be easily adapted to an introduction to any particular field. For example, a course on labour economics could ask students to do the assignment on different kinds of labour markets around them. These could include a standard job market, perhaps with an assigned location at a local recruiting centre or a newspaper office, a spot labour market e.g. for seasonal fruit pickers, a public sector labour market with an assigned location at a municipal office, and so on. Similarly, a course on international trade could assign a FYC assignment based on the theme of globalization with locations including a multinational company’s offices, an immigrant cultural centre, a local grocery store which stocks products from around the world, as well as university departments such as finance, international relations or politics. The basic structure of this assignment could possibly also be used as a starting point for a more advanced research project, e.g. on the effects and reactions to a recent trade agreement. Some of our students surveyed public opinion on inequality and the welfare state; this would be an excellent way to do a FYC-style project about any applied economic topic.

5.4 THE CHALLENGE OUTSIDE ECONOMICS

From the discussion above, it is clear that it is a fairly straightforward task to extend the FYC to subjects other than economics. An engineering project for example, could be based on a set of buildings and their role in the history or future of engineering. An English literature project could be based on locations that have a link to different authors or different styles of literature. A political science project could be based on different institutions such as a government department, a local council, public roadworks and so on. In some sense, the

innovativeness of the FYC is in the fact that different forms of assessment are used less in economics compared to other fields, so this assignment should actually be quite familiar to those outside economics.

5.5 THE THREE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE CHALLENGE

We feel that there are three essential elements of the FYC, around which the assignment can be moulded depending on the context. The first is that the research is done in groups. This is essential to the *raison d'être* of the assignment – that it encourages peer conversations and learning in an ever more connected world – and it eases novices into academic research. The second essential element is the requirement for a multimedia output. We feel that allowing students to do a traditional written essay or a slide presentation restricts the scope of the project. These are formats that they will typically use in the rest of the course and may have been using in the past. The FYC enables students to think outside the box not just in terms of content but also in terms of formats and hence encourages creativity. This includes using non-text based sources or using text-based sources in a different way. We believe that allowing a traditional format for the research output would have a negative knock-on effect on the content as well. Finally, we feel that starting the project (but not necessarily completing it) at the very beginning of a course enables students to think outside the box and not try to map their research onto the course texts or lectures exactly. The course leader may ask students to reflect on (or go back and edit) their research output once the relevant topics have been covered in class. As long as the basic project begins at the start of the course, this still allows students to approach the topic with an open mind. Within these constraints, we think that the FYC can be adapted to many different contexts, but it may work best as an introduction to a field.

SECTION 6: CONCLUSION

The FYC project was conceived as a way to introduce students to economics through research rather than lectures and textbooks as is usually done. It was also meant to facilitate peer learning and collaborative work. Overall, we felt that the quality of the FYC output produced by our students was quite good and that the students had learnt both new material and so-called “soft” skills from the assignment. We also felt that the group atmosphere in the tutorials throughout the rest of the academic year was enhanced as a result of the FYC. As such, we think that this assignment could be adapted to teaching economics in other contexts, as well as to teaching (especially introductory material) in other fields. However, it was clear that the group aspect of the assignment could be further strengthened. In this section, we describe the changes proposed for the next iteration of the Challenge in its original setting.

Many students felt that the timeline for completion was too long. Not only did they mention that most of the work had been done over just a few days, they also suggested that a tighter timeline might have helped to focus group members’ attention which could have increased the quality of the contribution. We felt that starting the FYC before the first week of classes was a good idea as it helped students build connections right away. As the theme of the assignment was the first chapter of the introductory text, we wanted to let the students have a

chance to see the material discussed in the lecture (during the first week of classes). This implies that we could shorten the timeline to 2-3 weeks rather than 5 weeks. An advantage of this shorter timeline might be that students are less likely to get distracted as they are introduced to more and more aspects of university life as the term wears on.

The other main shortcoming pointed out by students was the usual free-ridership problem. In other group projects, we have found that having a designated group leader (selected either by the lecturer or organically by the group) helps mitigate this problem. Another possible solution is to break down the assignment into smaller tasks which could be completed by selected individuals. This of course risks the group activity becoming just a collection of individual activities. In several other instances we noticed the importance of training students how to effectively work in groups. Letting students discuss the assignment during contact hours may help to draw attention to the work being done and encourages potential free riders to take responsibility. This kind of directed discussion (facilitated by the tutor or the lecturer) could also help address the previous point, that is, it could help in creating synergies between the individually assigned tasks so that the whole of the group project ends up being more than just the sum of the individual parts. This approach however, implies a strain on limited contact hours. One way around this might be to use the FYC output (e.g. of previous years) to cover the introductory material in the lecture. For our context, a large chunk of the chapter on which the FYC was based could be discussed in the lecture using past year's media contributions.

Finally, students noted that the assignment's link to the curriculum was not strong enough. This is perhaps a comment on how the students perceived the text – that the first chapter does not link very closely to the rest of the book. It may also be a reflection of the fact that students have a fairly rigid idea about what constitutes economics. Several students mentioned that it was interesting to learn about the history of economics at the start of the year when they were not as consumed by their curricular work as they might otherwise be. Others complained that their assigned thinker did not have much to do with economics. Using previous years' FYC output to discuss the chapter might be a good way of addressing this problem as well. A reflective exercise – e.g. asking students to write a sentence about how their project relates to the textbook definition of economics, once at the start of the project and again after completion – may also help to make this link. Such an exercise is also a perfect opportunity to reiterate the breadth of study that economics spans.

In conclusion, we think that the FYC is a very good way to highlight the importance of research-based university education and to encourage independent thinking in a large cohort. This may be used as a prelude to more involved research for example in term papers or theses, but it could also be used in a context where extended research projects are not possible. The FYC is also a way to model academic collaboration among students, and as such, acts as an introduction to a skill that is highly valued in many different kinds of work contexts.

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APPENDIX: THE FIRST YEAR CHALLENGE NOTES

F I R S T Y E A R C H A L L E N G E

Dear First-Year-Student,

Welcome to XXX and congratulations on your choice to study economics with us. We want you to dive into this exciting subject straight away and have prepared a little group challenge for you. So let's not waste any time and get started!

You have each been assigned to a PERSONAL TUTOR GROUP (5-10 students per group). A group meeting with your personal tutor has already been scheduled for induction week (You should have received this information via email - make sure you come to your group meetings, as they are compulsory!). You have also already been assigned to **tutorial group for your ECONXXX** module and mostly, two personal tutor groups form one EconXXX tutorial group. Don't worry if you do not know your tutorial group yet, for the first year challenge it is enough **to know the name of your personal tutor**.

The first year challenge is a group project which forms part of your Introduction to Economics module (EconXXX). We ask students to **collaborate and create TWO short videos or podcasts** within their ECONXXX tutorial group. You should start the project during induction week and continue working on it during the first four weeks of term 1. You will upload your final contribution just before reading week onto the Econ1001 Moodle Page. The winning group will then be announced in one of your Econ1001 lectures. The best contributions will also be featured in an economics undergraduate conference in April 2015.

Project description:

Students will collaborate in their ECONXXX tutorial groups to create TWO short videos or podcasts. This media contributions should be no longer than 3 minutes and focus on a **topic, which relates to** this year's first year challenge theme, to your group meeting point as well as to any part of Unit 1 of your 1001 textbook.

You can access this **FREE E-BOOK** by registering on this website: www.core-econ.org. The e-book is on *the Inkling platform* and can only be accessed using Google Chrome. Best to register straight away! This is your main EconXXX course book and you will need access to it from induction week onwards.

Students from one tutorial group should **form two roughly equal sized sub-groups**. The subgroups work on the same topic but should focus on a slightly different angle. It is up to you if both groups create a video or a podcast or if your group output is one video and one podcast. How you split your group is up to you!

This year's theme is: *"London – A city of social commentators and thinkers"*

Group Meeting Point: On Monday 22 September (during induction week) you will meet up with the other members of your Tutorial Group. We have assigned a unique meeting point to each group. All meeting points are listed at the end of this document and are linked to the **name of your personal tutor**. Check who your personal tutor is and find out where you will meet the other group members.

You should **go to your meeting point** straight after your 'First Year Induction Session (which ends at around 5pm). So we would expect all group members to be at their meeting point by 5:30pm. Stay at your meeting point till after 5:30pm to make sure you meet all your group members. Note: Your personal tutor will NOT be at the meeting point, but you will meet her or him during induction week

If you are a **joint degree or BASC student**, you will not have been to the Economics Induction Session, but you should also make sure you meet with your fellow group members on Monday 22 September at 5:30pm at your assigned meeting point.

Once you are at your meeting point look out for other students from your group. Each group has about 10-15 students and usually comprises students from **two** personal tutors. The group will be working together on the project, so you should exchange names, emails and phone numbers to make it easy to contact each other. Also make a note which students are assigned to which personal tutor and bring a list to your personal tutor meeting. This way you can identify whoever was missing on the 22nd September. The whole group will meet again in

your first week of lectures for your first ECONXXX tutorial. Check your timetable where and when you meet. Use the time at your meeting point to brainstorm for a good topic... You may even want to continue your discussion over a cup of tea or coffee once all group members have arrived?

Content of your media contribution: Your meeting point has a connection to a social scientist or thinker with a link to London. We have provided you with a list of people further down in this document. Choose a person, which you think has a connection to your meeting point. Sometimes the connection may be obvious, but sometimes you have to do some additional research. It could also be that more than one thinker fits to your meeting point. In this case it is up to you to choose. Your video or podcast should relate to this person and his/her ideas as well as to some aspects or the overall theme of unit 1 of your EconXXX text book.

Be creative. It's up to your group to find an interesting topic, which combines all three aspects (thinker, meeting point, unit 1 of your textbook). Brainstorm a couple of possibilities and decide. Also decide what kind of media file your group would like to create (a video of **max 3 minutes** in one of the standard video files such as .mp4, .avi, .mov, .mpg, .rm or a podcast of **max 3 minutes** in .mp3 format.). **Try to keep your media file below 30MB.**

Decide on a strategy on how and when to work on the project during the week and when to meet up again during induction week and over the course of the term. There are around 15 students in your group and you should make sure that everyone contributes to the project. We would expect some students to be more involved with the technical side of production, others more with the research part of the task, others with the presentation.

Need help with creating media files? This is a basic tutorial: XXX

Also, distribute the tasks wisely. Some of you may be experienced with creating media files, others will prefer to work on a research task. It's up to you to distribute these tasks as you see fit.

Upload your media contribution on your ECONXXX Moodle Page:

Your Moodle EconXXX course page includes a link to upload your media contribution. The **deadline** for uploading your file is WEDNESDAY 29 OCTOBER 2014 at 6pm. You may not be able to log onto this page yet but you will gain access once registered during induction week.

Do you have more questions:

Contact your EconXXX TA or send an email to either XXXX or XXXX

Timetable for the project

Induction week:

- Meet your tutorial group on Monday during induction week at your assigned meeting point.
- Meet your tutorial group AND your personal tutor during induction week
- Start discussing the project and distribute tasks to individual team members.
- Read chapter 1 of the textbook.

First week of term:

- Meet your tutorial group during the first week of term (check your timetable) for your first EconXXX tutorial.
- Organise further group meetings (this is your own responsibility!) to work on your project.

Week 2-4 of term:

- Meet with your tutorial group during these weeks to work on your project

Week 5 of term:

- Upload your group project on Moodle. Deadline is Wednesday 29 October XXXX at 6pm.

After reading week:

- Announcement of winning group.

London – A city of social commentators and thinkers

Please find below a list of noted social commentators who are linked with the themes explored in Unit 1 of the CORE text. Each of you will have also received an email indicating a location in central London. Please go to this location on Monday 22 September after your First Year Induction Session, where you will meet up with the rest of your group at around 5:30pm. Your location will have a link to at least one of the thinkers below. The group project involves identifying the thinker/s associated with your location and making a three minute video/podcast focusing on the thinker's contribution to the themes of capitalism, growth and inequality as explored in Unit 1 of your textbook.

Note that some locations might have connections to more than one person on this list, whilst others on this list might be linked to more than one location (Bloomsbury has been a hotbed of intellectual activity!). Your job is to make the most interesting video/podcast you can, given your location, so if there is a connection to more than one person, choose the person you think makes for the most interesting project!

Also note that some locations will have more obvious connections than others. If your location is not one of these, you should view this as an opportunity to be more creative and use all the resources at your disposal to make a connection between your location and someone on this list. If all else fails, remember that Google is your friend!

This is the list of thinkers:

- ❖ JM Keynes
- ❖ Karl Marx
- ❖ David Ricardo
- ❖ Jeremy Bentham
- ❖ Charles Dickens
- ❖ Charles Darwin
- ❖ Francis Galton
- ❖ Lionel Robbins
- ❖ Beatrice and Sidney Webb
- ❖ Francis Edgeworth
- ❖ Adam Smith
- ❖ MK Gandhi
- ❖ Francis Bacon
- ❖ Thomas Coram
- ❖ Emmeline Pankhurst
- ❖ RH Tawney and William Beveridge
- ❖ Karl Pearson
- ❖ JS Mill
- ❖ Florence Nightingale
- ❖ AC Pigou
- ❖ C Babbage
- ❖ WS Jevons
- ❖ Giuseppe Mazzini

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. How do I find my group's meeting point?

Ans: The table on the last few pages of this document lay out the specifics of each group's meeting point with a **map** and a picture of the location. It might be useful to have a wireless-enabled device (smartphone, tablet etc.) with you in case you get lost.

2. Who else will be in my group?

Ans: The others in your groups will be first years just like yourself, and will be have the same Personal Tutor and EconXXXX tutorial group for the coming year. You will meet them at the meeting point on Monday. This is a good opportunity to introduce yourselves (maybe over a cup of coffee!) and exchange **phone numbers or email addresses**, as you will need to work together over the next few weeks.

3. Will my Personal Tutor be at the meeting point on Monday?

Ans: No! You will meet your Personal Tutor later in the week as indicated in the relevant email.

4. I couldn't find the rest of my group, what should I do?

Ans: Make sure you are at the right meeting point (each group has a unique meeting point). If you're at the right place, perhaps others are finding it tough to find. So wait for **15-20 minutes** at least, hopefully at least a couple of others will find it. If all else fails, you can liaise with the rest of your group when you meet your Personal Tutor later in the week.

5. What is the final output of the project?

Ans: A video or a podcast lasting no longer than 3 minutes. You can record this on your phone/laptop/tablet and on any software you choose, but it should be submitted in .mp4,.avi, .mov,.mpg, .rm or .mp3 (podcast) format. The final output does not have to be of professional quality – the **content** is more important!

6. How do I make a connection with my assigned location?

Ans: This is really up to you and your group. One idea might be to do something like the **Economists-in-Action** videos in the CORE online textbook.

7. How can I find out about the thinker associated with my assigned location?

Ans: Some locations will have an obvious connection with a specific thinker, but for others, you will have to do a bit of work. It might be handy to have a wireless-enabled device with you, so that you can do a quick bit of **research** to figure out who the most relevant thinker is and also a bit about their work.

8. So are we making a video about the life of this thinker?

Ans: No! The video/podcast should focus on how this thinker's work links to the themes explored in Unit 1 of the CORE online textbook. For example, if your thinker was Max Lorenz, the obvious connection to Unit 1 is the measurement of inequality. Your project could then focus on how Lorenz's work influenced the study of inequality and the link between capitalism, growth and inequality. Remember that this thinker's arguments may not necessarily be correct, so do try to be **critical** in your analysis

9. There is a lot of information about my thinker in the ECONXXX textbook. Do we need to find any more information?

Ans: Yes! This is your chance to do some research and come up with something new and interesting. You should connect your video to **specifics** of the text and/or the lecture, but try to show us how you can extend this. When you do your research, remember that Wikipedia can be a useful starting point,

but as anyone and everyone can write or edit a Wikipedia entry, this is not always the best source to use. Also, note that XXX has a very strict policy on **plagiarism** ([LINK](#)) and a lack of proper acknowledgement will be penalized.

10. My assigned location is the British Museum, and 10 of the thinkers on the list are linked to it. What should I do?!

Ans: Which thinker do you think you can make the most interesting video on? Choose him or her! For example, if you were doing a project on Elizabethan drama and your thinker was Shakespeare, it might be hard to do something really new and interesting because everyone knows so much about Shakespeare already. But Christopher Marlowe is not quite so familiar and might make a more interesting subject. Of course, if you can unearth something **new and interesting** about Shakespeare and link it to your location and to the text, you should go for it!