Using Short Writing Assignments to Teach Critical Thinking in a Large Intermediate Micro Course

#TeachECONference 2020

Kripa Freitas and Andrea Williams

University of Toronto
Overview

▶ Why Writing?
▶ Task design elements.
▶ Scaling up.
▶ Lessons learned.
Instructor goals

- Achieve learning course objectives.
- Students able to transfer knowledge outside of specific course context.
Course Design

Learning Objectives
(Bloom’s Taxonomy)
Create Evaluate Analyze Apply Understand Remember

Learning Activities
Algorithmic Problems

Assessments
Midterms/Finals
Why Writing?

▪ Writing to learn.

▪ Open-ended: explore topic in-depth, independently, and critically.

▪ Transferable skills: authentic tasks.

Implementing them at scale?
Is Just Writing Enough?

- Writing is the mode of delivery. Economics is the focus.
- Key: Assessment design
  - Learning objectives at forefront.
  - Guide students through the process.
Task Design Elements

▶ Critical Thinking (Brookfield 2012)

▶ **Open-ended**: Identify assumptions and link to inferences.

▶ **Evaluation task**: generate different arguments, choice based on a set of defendable criteria, preferably using supporting evidence.

▶ Transferability: abstract conceptual **connections** between the situation and class material.
Implementation

Narrow course concepts $\iff$ specific, student relevant context

- Consistent grading.
- Academic integrity.

Ask: How did I approach this task? How can I design supports for students to guide them through this process?
Examples

- Force students to work for 10 hours in a course or not?
- Buy disability insurance or save?
- Recommend a type of price discrimination for new education app.
Choices to Lower Costs

- Short (750 words) with a single topic choice for all students.
- Well defined concepts: consistent, efficient grading.
- Three assignments $\Rightarrow$ prior feedback becomes formative.
- Use technology + rubrics.
Rubrics

- Transparency about grading criteria.
- Communicates expectations and indicate relative importance.
- Information in the categories makes giving feedback efficient.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Economic Analysis</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of ECO206 framework</td>
<td>21-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Economic Analysis</td>
<td>Argument is specific, focused, developed very well without any errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Analysis</td>
<td>Strengths and weaknesses of argument tied to assumptions and the conditions under which they hold. Evaluation criterion, i.e. why they chose Adopt/Not, clear. Counterarguments addressed related to own argument and addressed effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of economic concepts to real world situation</td>
<td>Excellent job translating task into framework. Shows independent thinking and any new ideas are developed and integrated into analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lessons Learned

▶ Integrate writing into the fabric of the course.

▶ Identify challenges unique to your context and design around them. E.g. ELL.

▶ Make communication a two-way process.

▶ Continually experiment.
Writing in Intermediate Micro

- Way to develop and assess critical thinking and transferable skills.
- Writing as delivery mechanism.
- Narrow, specific tasks with rubrics help economize grading resources.
- Requires communication, experimentation and integration to be successful.
Contact Information

Kripa Freitas

k.freitas@utoronto.ca

Department of Economics, University of Toronto