

What Does Homer Simpson Know About Microeconomics? Teaching Principles by Incorporating Popular Media Into a Group Exercise

Sarah Burke
Villanova University

Patricia Robak
Drexel University

Carolyn Fabian Stumph
Purdue University Fort Wayne

In Daniel Hamermesh's article, "Microeconomic Principles Teaching Tricks," he notes that what appears to be largely lacking in the literature is plain advice about how to avoid having the (microeconomics) course becoming a burden to both students and the instructor (Hamermesh, 2002). In this paper, we discuss the use of a group exercise in introductory microeconomics in which the students use a clip from a popular movie or television show to demonstrate an economic concept. The activity is modeled for the students and, with guidance from the instructor or teaching assistant, the students use their creativity and critical thinking to find and explain clips of their own. This exercise has the added benefit of honing oral and written presentation skills as well as traditional economic analysis techniques. According to Hamermesh (2002), the burden of teaching while maintaining student interest is greater in economics than in other courses, perhaps due to the abstract nature of the material. This exercise helps to keep the focus on teaching ideas, not techniques.

Keywords: project, movies, tv shows, microeconomics

INTRODUCTION

The majority of current college students were born in the early 2000s. Their adolescence was likely influenced by *Homer Simpson*, *Hannah Montana*, *iCarly*, Nintendo and Wii, while Instagram and social media helped navigate their social structure. Computer math games and white boards commonly supplemented elementary learning, with texts and emails emerging as a dominant form of communication. The result is a generation of students who are comfortable with a virtual format for entertainment, commerce, and learning. To leverage their propensity for digital material, developing classroom content and projects with this focus will likely aid in garnering interest and enthusiasm for the academic based concepts. The literature suggests that this generation benefits from the implementation of such "modern" techniques that utilize the digital media to which they are accustomed. This paper describes a group project

that can be implemented in the introduction to microeconomics classroom that embraces their multi-media comfort.

In this group project, typically assigned toward the end of the class, students are asked to find their own movie or TV clips. Examples have been modeled for the students throughout the course. The project gives the students some creative license in the search for clips demonstrating economic concepts or theories. The results of their group work are formally recorded for the instructor's review or presented to the class.

We have found that the students respond overwhelmingly favorably to this project. While they do report that it is "harder than it looks," they are familiar with generating video content, in many cases, and enjoy exercising their skills in an academic environment. This project enhances the students' understanding of the sometimes abstract concepts presented in class. It additionally helps them see the real-world applications of these concepts in an entertaining way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current undergraduate student population is comprised primarily of individuals born in the 21st century whereby exposure to digital content of various forms is pervasive. This poses a challenge to instructors as the learning style of these digital natives has evolved from the learning styles of non-digital natives. According to Seemiller and Grace (2016), "Learning environments that capitalize on Generation Z's interests and strengths should be vastly different from those of other generations" and they suggest providing, "Generation Z students with a pedagogy that aligns seamlessly with how they prefer to learn" (p. 205). So how does this generation prefer to learn? Hartman, et al (2019) claim that these "students no longer prefer passive dissemination of information...[they] prefer to watch a task taking place" (p. 236). Trends are surfacing whereby content is adapted to Youtube style videos claiming that, "they (Gen Z) learn new information much more quickly than their predecessors" (Adamy, 2018, p. A1). Additionally, Quintanilha (2017) and Jurenka, et al (2018) provide analysis on pedagogical innovations utilizing Facebook and You-Tube. An estimated 59% of Generation Z employ Youtube for learning. (Global Research Insights, 2018). Further, this trend is affirmed in research based on the use of imagery to enhance learning. According to Kouyoumdjian (2012), "the effective use of visuals can decrease learning time, improve comprehension, enhance retrieval, and increase retention" (para. 6). Correspondingly, a movement towards adapting educational topics to visual and digital based content has arisen in academia.

Further examining the research, we find many examples of the usage of visual multimedia in action. Within the field of economics, many academics are utilizing TV, movie clips or other digital media to expound the concepts and principles of economics. Sexton (2006) asserts that "movie clips can vividly illustrate economic issues...[and] can be used to spark discussion, to help students remember certain concepts, or to just make the class more fun, so students will look forward to attending the next class" (Conclusion). Several resources exist to educate instructors about the dissemination of economic theories through video imagery. Burke, et al (2020) offer a manual for teaching the major economic topics via video clips and find, "that presenting economic concepts through video clips is an effective way to reinforce class concepts and increase student engagement" (Conclusion). They utilize clips from many popular media outlets including TV series such as *Modern Family*, *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Simpsons* as well as commercials such as "Coke vs Pepsi", "Little Caesars" and "Milk Life". Conaway and Clark (2015) utilize the popular TV series, *Parks and Recreation* to deliver economic content. Kuester, et al (2014) offer economic theories through the lens of the TV series, *The Office* while Ghent, et al (2010) utilize the situational comedy of *Seinfeld* to convey the economic principles. In addition, Suddath (2013) uses pop culture references and Leet & Houser (2003) utilize classic films and documentaries. Even websites have been developed as a resource for instructors who would like to incorporate video media into their courses (www.econ.video). These authors assert that the employment of multimedia is an effective way to engage students, maintain academic delivery standards and promote retention of the material.

SAMPLE PROJECT

Introduce the project by example. Students are accustomed to the model as media clips are shown weekly in our courses to demonstrate various economics topics (See Burke et al (2020)). Still, it is helpful to show an example with respect to the instructions. Choose a clip from *The Office* (Season 5 Ep 11, 2008, “Moroccan Christmas”) as an example. This clip is used for several reasons. First, the television show is rich with examples of economic concepts. Second, *The Office* ran for nine seasons and was a popular TV show when the typical undergraduate student was at a stage of childhood and adolescent development, so many students are familiar with the show. Further, it remains relevant as syndication allows for daily reruns on some networks and episodes are currently available through streaming services.

The clip is used early in the semester to introduce supply, demand and market equilibrium. It is a particularly good illustration of changes to supply and demand and market equilibrium. Showing the clip again later in the semester allows for discussions of additional concepts from the course. For instance, elasticity and determinants of elasticity are relevant to both the supply and demand changes in the clip.

To demonstrate the project, first introduce the clip, giving background information that may help students who are not familiar with the episode or the television program. Here the clip comes from a holiday episode in the fifth season of the show. Dwight, the peculiar and goofy main character in the clip, craves authority and respect. In this clip, Dwight is shown bragging about his current money-making scheme. He has conducted research to determine the most popular toy of the season, buys all the local inventory, and sells the toys to desperate parents for a profit.

Next, explain the economic concepts relevant to the clip. Draw the perfectly inelastic supply, explaining how the quickly approaching holiday (time) is a determinant of supply. Following, draw the demand curve showing the equilibrium price as advertised. Show the shift to supply when Dwight buys the local inventory of dolls. The advertised price is no longer performing its rationing function, which creates a shortage in the Scranton market. Further, show the changes to demand as the holiday approaches, explaining the relatively inelastic demand due to a lack of substitutes for the trendy gift and the limited time to the holiday.

Project Guidelines

Students are provided the following instructions to complete the group project/presentation:

- Choose a clip from a popular media such as film or television shows. It is important that you set up the premise by introducing the characters and setting the stage.
- During your presentation you will show the clip to the class. The clip should run approximately 30-90 seconds in length and should contain only PG related material.
- Using teaching aids such as graphs and/or examples, explain the economic concept illustrated in the clip. Be sure to teach the concept to your fellow students.
- All group members will participate equally in a 10-minute presentation.
- Submit a one-page summary of your presentation and the economic analysis you demonstrated along with any presentation aids such as PowerPoint slides at the conclusion of your presentation. Include group members, presentation title and references.

Examples of Student Projects Delivered and the Economic Topics That Were Discussed

Extreme Couponing, (2012) “Pam & Broderick”, Season 5, Ep 4
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Cv_giyz1c)

Opportunity cost
Explicit costs and Implicit costs
Price Discrimination

The Simpsons (1993) “I Love Lisa”, Season 4, Ep 15
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWokp1t-RKk> from 0:46-2:17)

Perfectly inelastic demand
Determinants of price elasticity demand

Market equilibrium
Market structure and competition

Titanic (1997) Half the lifeboats (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftMvabKDuiA>)
Perfectly inelastic supply of lifeboats
Determinants of supply
Elasticity of demand for lifeboats
Rationing function of price

Frozen (2013) Big bumper blowout clip (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_w105aWPNY)
Supply, demand and equilibrium for both the carrot and ice markets
Perfect competition in the ice industry
Negative externalities because of an overproduction of ice and third-party costs

Implementation and Tips for Success

Organization on behalf of both the instructor and students is essential. Give students a strict time limit on the length of their presentation. The technology in your classroom, including audio settings, should be tested prior to students' arrival. Further, ask students to download the clip or log on to the streaming platform and queue the clip prior to class to avoid lengthy technological disruptions and long silent pauses within the presentation.

Stress the importance of classroom appropriate clips when presenting the project. For example, some movies contain violence, strong language and/or sexual situations that can make students uncomfortable and are not relevant or appropriate for an economics classroom. We tell students that movies or shows that contain this kind of content are eligible (R rated movies for example), but that clip must be "clean" for classroom viewing. In addition, convey to the students the need to be sensitive to cultural, gender, race and other biases. Students have been respectful of this issue.

Emphasize the importance of considering how the clip might be interpreted out of context. For example, the animated sitcom genre that includes *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *South Park* are intended for an adult audience. They often tackle controversial issues with wit and sarcasm. The story lines are also rich with examples of economic concepts. While the satirical humor might appeal to an audience of college students, the intent is easily misinterpreted in clip form.

In the semesters impacted by the pandemic, we began to have students submit recorded lectures. It is a practice that we will continue to adopt. It allowed us to preview the presentations for problematic content. We are able to pick a few presentations to share with the class and provide detailed feedback to all students.

Plagiarism can be an issue and should be considered. For instance, *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Seinfeld* are all the subject of sites that layout examples of economic concepts by clip. We struggle with how to handle this issue. In some semesters these shows have not been eligible for the project, but this did not solve the problem as many individual clips are noted on internet sites. Another strategy is to include a creativity score on the grading rubric. Clips that are "borrowed" from existing sites earn zero points for creativity. Students can still use them, however, as long as they provide an original analysis of the economics relevant to the clip.

Finally, instructors should also consider policies and procedures of their academic institution for use of media clips based on The Copyright Act before implementing this project.

CONCLUSION

This paper introduces a classroom group project that uses popular media video clips to illustrate economic concepts. The project requires students to illustrate, explain and present an economic concept through the use of digital media, a format with which the current college aged generation are particularly comfortable. The projects enhance students' comfort for learning through media, reinforces class material and offers further engagement and connection with the course material. The student feedback on this project

has been positive. The presentations are dynamic and technically sound. We have observed that, when students are provided with an incentive for creativity, the top students flourish. The group aspect of the project, combined with the natural competitiveness of business students, also results in high quality work. Further, the student audience has been engaged and energetic, generating discussions that extend beyond the limits of the presentation. In short, it is evident that both the presenters and the audience find a deeper tie to the material because it is delivered in a more familiar and acceptable format. It is worth noting that the technique is specifically favorably referenced in course evaluations.

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