

Welcome to the Autumn newsletter

September has been a particularly busy time for the Economics Network, including our biennial conference *Developments in Economics Education (DEE)* and our annual *Key Contacts* conference – to which a contact from every economics department was invited. (Presentations and notes from both events are available on our website.)

We presented our annual Learning and Teaching Awards at DEE. This year we had five winners and awarded two commendations – read more about these and our conferences on pages 2 and 3.

Other highlights include three Mini Project reports from *Classroom Experiments* at Coventry University; *Using a ePortfolio/PDP tool for Economics and Business students* at the University of Swansea and *Introducing Problem-Based Learning to a First-Year Curriculum* at the University of Ulster.

Ros O'Leary
Deputy Director/Centre Manager
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What do employers want from economics graduates?

Earlier this year the Economics Network, in partnership with the Royal Economic Society, commissioned a survey of key employers of economics graduates.

This survey has identified employers' requirements in terms of graduate skills and mapped these against the 2006 revised Quality Assurance Agency Economics Benchmark Statement. Employers feedback the need for improvement in knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- Recent developments in economics policy
- Application of economics knowledge/problem solving
- Written and verbal communication skills
- Job application and interview skills

The full report is available from:
www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/surveys



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John Sloman, Director of the Economics Network, receives a special Lifetime Achievement Award at the DEE Conference 2007, see page 2



Learning and Teaching in Economics Awards Results

Winners of the 2007 Learning and Teaching in Economics Awards received their certificates at a special ceremony at the Developments in Economics Education (DEE) conference dinner in Cambridge.



Joint winner Robert Hoffmann (left) receives his award from John Sloman and Inna Pomorina

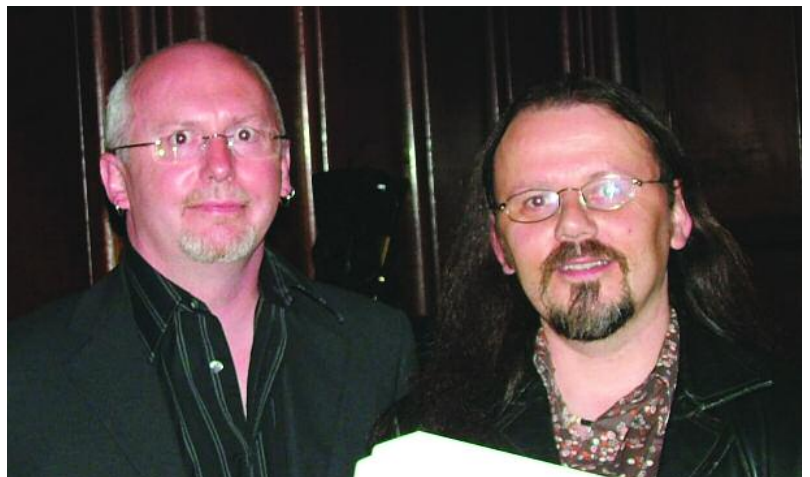
Outstanding Teaching Award

Joint Winners: Manuel Palazuelos-Martinez, London School of Economics and Robert Hoffmann, University of Nottingham

Manuel was a teaching assistant at the LSE and has received the department teaching prize in economics for four consecutive years. He consistently gets excellent marks for all his teaching. The classes he teaches have previously had poor marks and he has helped to transform them not only with his own teaching but with his support for other teaching assistants on the same course.

Robert is an Associate Professor in Industrial Economics and this award refers to his MBA modules. The MBA students tend to be a notoriously challenging group but Rob manages to consistently get

the highest level of feedback of any member of staff in the school. He has managed to bring alive his teaching through his use of experimental economics. He has outstanding communication and



Joint winners, Paul Latreille (right), University of Swansea and Philip Wane, Nottingham Trent University

meticulous organisational skills, and is very supportive of other members of staff in their teaching

eLearning Award

Joint Winners: Paul Latreille, University of Swansea and Philip Wane, Nottingham Trent University.

Paul was nominated for his excellent communication skills: students consistently describe his lectures and classes as easy to understand, enjoyable and inspiring. In particular, he applies contemporary teaching techniques in his classes (including videos, case studies, small group exercises, his blog and podcasts) and always makes himself available to students.

Philip's modules reflect his interests in technological and social development, covering for example e-commerce (using eBay as a case study), the digital divide, the online music industry and computer mediated communication. He does this in keeping with the content of the module using a range of web-based multimedia and delivering virtual lectures for many sessions in the second term. Student feedback is consistently positive and enthusiastic.

Student Nominated Award

Winner: Duncan Watson, University of Swansea

Commendations: Wyn Morgan University of Nottingham and Osman Ouattara, University of Swansea

Duncan applies economic theory to topics that are not traditionally analysed in economics courses, such as drugs and crime. This makes his modules particularly popular with students. He uses personal stories, humour and technology to keep students engaged. His enthusiasm was highly praised.

Wyn has been commended on several counts for his enthusiastic and inspired teaching and for building good relations with his students from their first year through to their third year. He has also been commended for the supporting and mentoring role he plays for other members of staff in the Department.

Osman teaches mathematical and development economics. His teaching has been characterised by his students as articulate, funny and interesting and what's more, he has achieved the remarkable feat of making students enjoy their maths lessons.



Special Lifetime Achievement Award

At the DEE Conference dinner at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, a special Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to John Sloman, Director of the Economics Network, recognising him as an 'Outstanding Teacher and Ambassador of Economics'.

This was not one of the Economics Network's awards but was jointly sponsored by the Government Economic Service, the Scottish Economic Society and the Higher Education Academy.



Wyn Morgan, joint winner of a student nominated commendation

Full details are available at:
www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/awards/2007

Key Contacts

The Economics Network has a key contact in every economics department, unit or division. There is an annual meeting of key contacts, which this year took place the day before the DEE conference at the Møller Centre in Cambridge. Many of the contacts stayed on for the conference. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss current issues facing lecturers and this year the issues were assessment, feedback and plagiarism.

The challenges for assessment and feedback included:

- aligning assessment with the curriculum and student work
- using assessment to develop skills
- choosing the most appropriate assessment types
- the incentives involved with assessment types and schedules
- strategic learners
- dealing with larger numbers and the marking and support implications
- finding time-saving methods of assessment
- the use of groupwork in assessment

- how to assess deep learning while maintaining progression rates and average marks
- how to provide feedback efficiently
- getting students to engage with feedback and to learn from it for future assessment
- peer feedback and support

Plagiarism is a particular problem with the increasing availability of resources on the Internet. Issues raised included the need to help students understand the meaning and boundaries of plagiarism and the need for accurate referencing, the use of sanctions, the use of plagiarism detection software (such as Turnitin), designing opportunities for plagiarism out of assessment (e.g. the use of in-class assessment or individualised problem sets). Again, participants were given the opportunity to share their experiences and solutions.

Notes from the Key Contacts conference are available from the Economics Network's website at:

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2007/contacts

Economics Network Mini Projects

Generic ePortfolio/PDP tools for economics and business students

We are all aware of the requirement under Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) to provide “a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect on their personal development”. But how can we actually go about doing this?

One possible solution is the use of ePortfolio/PDP tools – an emerging set of digital technologies designed precisely to facilitate such activity by students. This mini project investigated the adoption of one such system in a first year skills module for Economics and Business students at the University of Swansea.

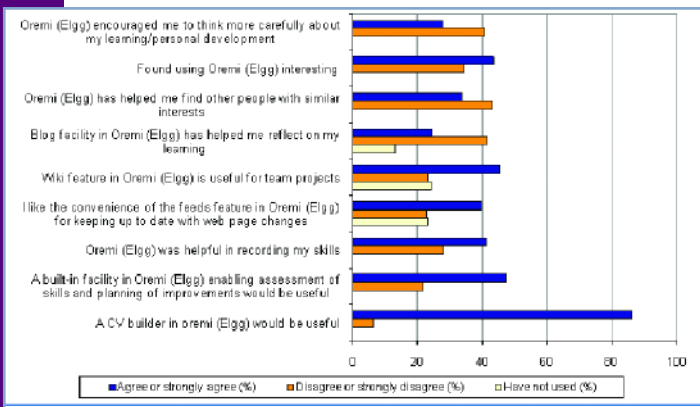
administered at the conclusion of the project). Students highlighted the value of the system in supporting group work, while blogging, social networking and ease of use were also commented on favourably. Nonetheless, it is clear there remains considerable further scope for the technology to impact on student learning/ reflection/PDP and hence employability.

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Realising this, of course, depends crucially on student engagement: hands-on introduction sessions, together with greater emphasis on purpose/value and more scaffolding are key components, while the embracing of the platform by Careers in Swansea to deliver their resources is also welcomed. Improvements to the system which enhance both its aesthetics and

functionality will help too. Indeed, these afford exciting opportunities for the coming year as the system evolves into a personal learning environment – a space it is hoped students will increasingly come to feel they own...

Paul L. Latreille
University of Swansea



The system adopted was a local installation of the open-source Elgg platform (<http://elgg.org>), subsequently rebranded in Swansea as Oremi (<http://oremi.swan.ac.uk>). As discussed in the accompanying case study on the Network’s website (www.economicnetwork.ac.uk/showcase/latreille_eportfolio), the project was not without its difficulties: the platform was (is) still under development; students tended to see it primarily as a social networking rather than a personal development tool; and the (related) strategic engagement/use of the system by many.

Despite these limitations, the project was not without success (as revealed by the evaluation survey



Shared Learning A

Ever wondered, when stuck in a boring seminar trying to motivate students who won’t talk, what would happen if you, the exasperated teacher, left the room for 15 minutes? You probably know the answer – they’ll start talking the moment you leave!

So, now that they’re talking (after your influence has been removed), how can you get them to talk about economics?

Is it possible to organise the learning environment so as to harness the natural tendency for students to communicate with their peers, (rather than with their teachers), and at the same time provide sufficient motivation to talk about economics? Problem-based learning (PBL), I believe, provides such a learning environment.

Playing games

For many academics, teaching preparation normally involves keeping the material as up to date as possible and trying to find good recent real world applications of the theory being taught. This certainly reflected my approach over a number of years.

However, I became increasingly disappointed with the results. My classes increasingly seemed to involve me talking and the students pretending to listen and understand. Although I like the sound of my own voice, it became increasingly apparent that this passive style of learning was not proving to be very effective for the students. The challenge was to find ways of me keeping quiet whilst engaging the students in a more active style of learning. The method that most appealed to me was to try and introduce classroom experiments, having participated in

Economics Network Mini Projects

problem-based learning approach to economics

The aim of this mini project was to introduce PBL to the first year BSc (Economics) programme at the University of Ulster. The module selected was Microeconomics 1, which provides a 24-week teaching period spanning two semesters, 2 hours (back-to-back) per week. The PBL resources used in this debut year, along with the administrative procedures governing group activities and end-of-project evaluation, are provided at www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects.

The first year cohort was formed into groups comprising 4-5 students. Each PBL group was required to respond to a series of tasks (without the benefit of lectures) within predetermined timeframes. Tasks were designed to give students an opportunity to apply economic ideas to real-world issues.

One very attractive feature introduced to the PBL environment at Ulster was the use of final-year BSc (Economics) students to act as group facilitators. This proved to be a valuable learning experience for the first and final year students involved in the scheme.

Group activities included written reports, presentations and 'University Challenge' type quizzes.

According to the students, each of whom had to submit a confidential report evaluating their PBL experiences, PBL was felt to be a demanding, yet enjoyable way of learning about economics and economic issues. The end-year formal examination produced a higher median score over the



previous year using a lecture-seminar format.

In terms of developing independent learning skills, in this module students were continually taking learning-related decisions with the help of their peers; hopefully, this experience will give them the confidence to start taking decisions on their own.

Frank Forsythe
University of Ulster

some at an Economics Network conference. I was fortunate enough to obtain mini project funding from the Network. This acted as an effective commitment device, helping me to overcome my own present bias.

What I did

Five paper based classroom games were introduced into the level one Microeconomics module at Coventry University. Information and instructions on running the games was obtained from the Economics Network website and a series of articles published by Holt¹ in the Journal of Economic Perspectives. For most of the games, the only equipment required was a pack of playing cards.

In each case the game was played before I taught any relevant theory. Intuitively I thought that the explanations of the theory would be more effective if the students could constantly refer back to their experience of playing the game. In particular, how they and their colleagues responded to the incentives that faced them.

Evaluation

A range of methods were used to evaluate the impact of the games and I received a lot of help and support from staff at the Network. The results do suggest that students perceived the classroom experiments to be more effective in helping them to understand and learn the content of the module, compared with more traditional/passive methods of instruction. Below are some examples of student comments from the free-text questions:

"Excellent method of teaching otherwise difficult theories"

"It was a nice idea because it gave a different approach to learning the theory"

"They were a very effective way to explain key economic theories"

"They make the concepts a lot easier to understand".

1. Holt (1996) "Trading in a Pit Market" Journal of Economic Perspectives, Holt and Laury (1997) "Classroom Games: Voluntary Provision of a Public Good" Journal of Economic Perspectives, Holt and Capra (2000) "Classroom Games: A Prisoners Dilemma" Journal of Economic Education

Some final thoughts

Some academics may be deterred from introducing classroom experiments because of the preparation time involved. My own personal experience was that by using playing cards in many of the games, preparation time was kept to a minimum and not that onerous.

Material can also be easily copied and edited from the Network website. In addition the benefits do not only accrue to the students. I have found that using the games made teaching much more enjoyable. Games/experiments may also help to deal with a major problem in introductory modules – the heterogeneity of the students. They can engage those students who have studied economics before, while helping those who are new to the subject to get to grips with the key principles. From my own personal experience, it was often the students who had studied economics before who were the most positive about the impact of the games on their learning and understanding.

Jon Guest
Coventry University

Coffee, models and economists taking over the Government



A report from the Developments in Economics Education Conference 2007

I had the pleasure of attending and presenting at the DEE Conference in Cambridge, organised by the Economics Network. The keynote speeches were excellent and really set the tone for a great conference.

Andy Ross from the Government Economic Service kicked off proceedings and spoke on Educating Economists for Government. Economists really are taking over in Whitehall and Andy urged economics educators to focus on the practical and policy applications of economics, to produce a new generation of economists who could not only write the notes, but also read the music of economics.

David Hendry spoke on the topic of Teaching Undergraduate Econometrics and it was a classic example of taking a highly technical subject and making it entertaining, even for non-specialists. The key point he made was that technological change has enabled major advances in the fields of economic modelling and econometrics, but that in teaching it to undergraduates, they still need to be shown that it has practical implications and is not just a mathematical exercise.

Tim Harford is the FT's 'Undercover Economist' and he spoke on How Can Economists Grab the Attention of Students, and Keep it? Tim showed how economic principles can be applied to your love life, to help you save money in coffee shops and that giving children in developing countries basic improvements in healthcare, will improve their education outcomes more than books, computers or foreign teachers. He challenged economics educators to use such examples in the classroom to engage students.

Audio, video and images from the

keynotes are available from the Economics Network website.

A few thoughts on some of the other sessions

Paul Latreille from the University of Swansea spoke about his experience in using the Elgg/OreMi platform, to help students develop an ePortfolio/ PDP. Paul admitted there were pitfalls to this approach – the platform is still being developed, students treated it more like a social network and the sheer range of technologies you can use can be intimidating – but his enthusiasm and willingness to make an assault on a pretty steep learning curve, earned him a well-deserved elearning award, presented at the conference dinner.

Judith Piggott from Oxford Brookes reported back on a project that uses video and workshops from professional actors to improve the presentation skills of economics students – and there are even videos on YouTube to prove it! The full video/DVD educational package will be available via the Economics Network, in the not too distant future.

Alan Hutton from Glasgow Caledonian spoke about using audio as a way of getting students engaged with economic issues and his work with Spoken Word services. One of the keys to getting the best out of such audio assets is to treat them exactly like more traditional ones, so set an assignment on reviewing a Radio 4 programme on economic issues in the same way you might set one on a book chapter or journal article.

The workshop I ran was on the *Effective Use of Blogs for Economics Education*. Luckily, it was the second day of the conference, so people had had a chance to socialise at the conference dinner and were happy to talk, plus my fellow conspirator, Bhagesh Sachania, had run plenty

of workshop style events in the past!

What I learnt from the delegates contributions was that:

- we still need to provide definitions of the basic terms and language of blogging
- there is a reluctance to publish on the open web, for privacy reasons
- people are unaware of the range of possible pitfalls and opportunities of blogging

There is also more blogging activity going on than we are aware of, but some of it is happening in closed systems, within VLEs such as Blackboard, which is a shame as I'm sure we could learn a lot from what is going on there.

I had the privilege of sharing the session with Steve Greenlaw from the University of Mary Washington, who tackled the topic of Using Social Software to Empower Teaching and Learning in Economics in just 45 minutes. What followed was an amazing gallop through a whole range of ways of using freely available social software tools in economics teaching. Steve is turning this into a website using a blog, called *Augmenting Teaching and Learning with Social Software* or you can read his thoughts on teaching economics via his interesting blog, Pedabloggy.

My thanks to everyone at the Economics Network for organising a really interesting and useful conference.

Paul Ayres
Economics Editor,
Intute: Social Sciences
www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/economics/

All conference presentations are available from:
www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2007

New on our website

Themes

Theme documents are succinct guides to the important resources in an area related to teaching economics. New themes on the site include:

- Student Motivation and Active Learning
- Employability and Entrepreneurship
- Linking Research and Teaching
- Experiments and Games in the Classroom

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/themes/



Keynote presentations from DEE

Our three conference keynotes are viewable as online video

- Andrew Ross, Government Economic Service, "Educating Economists for Government"
- Prof. David Hendry, Oxford University, "Teaching Undergraduate Econometrics"
- Tim Harford, author of *The Undercover Economist*, "How can economists grab the attention of students, and keep it?"

Presentation materials from the other sessions at the DEE conference are also available.

economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2007/abstracts

Lecturer and GTA diaries

In a new section of our Reflections on Teaching archive, lecturers and teaching assistants in UK economics departments reflect frankly on their trials and tribulations.

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/showcase/diaries

Handbook for Economics Lecturers

Two new chapters have been added to the Handbook:

Teaching Heterodox Economics Concepts addresses the why and how of including heterodox approaches in an Economics course. It considers three different strategies, each with examples:

1. adding heterodox concepts to an orthodox module
2. creating a dedicated module
3. combining parallel perspectives in the same course. The chapter also offers tips and resources.

Undergraduate Research in Economics deals thoroughly with the topic of undergraduate research projects, from general principles through to specifics. The chapter includes two self-contained case studies and also has examples of grading rubrics and other documents.

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/handbook

Join us on YouTube

We have joined the YouTube video sharing community, and are using it to post our own videos, including some from the student film project, and in the near future some on careers in economics.

We are also using it to highlight interesting economics-related clips from other sources. If you're using video clips in your lectures, we'd be interested in your recommendations.

youtube.com/economicsnetwork



Clip from video made by students at the University of Exeter

External Examiners

If you are interested in being an external examiner, add your details to our national database. Contact the centre to be given the password for access, or to change your existing listing.

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/externals

Teaching in action

New and Aspiring Lecturers of Economics workshop

In mid October I took part in a residential two-day workshop at Burwalls, University of Bristol. The event brought together new and aspiring lecturers of economics to engage in dialogue about how we can make teaching of this subject more engaging for our students. We looked at the teaching of economics in lectures, seminars and small groups.

I believe that the organisers made this workshop very engaging for us participants. The workshop was made-up of a series of seminars.

The keynote speakers were John Sloman (Economics Network), Dr Rebecca Taylor (Nottingham Business School) and Dr Guglielmo Volpe (London Metropolitan University).

The design of the workshop was logical and coherent. For instance, the information we exchanged regarding "what makes bad teaching" was bunched up on the screen by John Sloman and formed a base for the first seminar "Making your lectures more effective". John encouraged dialogue about the teaching style we use and teaching challenges facing us today. He then gave some pointers for improvement and a guide for creating the perfect class.

I also learned about two very interesting projects: METAL and Threshold Concepts*. I now hope to put the METAL project in place at City College Manchester, where I am currently lecturing to help our students who study maths and statistics.



There were symposia sessions on:

- Elements in module/unit design
- Classroom experiments and games
- E-Learning and the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in economics
- Seminar and small group teaching

All seminars had a common trend, which appealed to me and the other participants – what works, what next?

I feel that it is vital to collaborate with other economics lecturers in other HE establishments to ensure that the abilities and needs of our students are catered for. There is a need to share resources and the Economics Network offers that.

Moreover, the Economics Network organises workshops, which are aimed at lecturers of economics. This is somewhat rare. Taking part in this workshop enabled me to further develop my inclination towards making my teaching of economics more effective and find out the ways technology can underpin this.

Dr Vitalia Kinakh
City College Manchester



Delegates engaged in a classroom experiments activity

* More information on these projects available through the Economics Network web site at: www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/fdt15/

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