A Look Inside Pedagogy, the Sawyer Way

Pedagogy is a term that is tossed around university campuses like a beach ball at Panama City in July. Pedagogical considerations are used to justify a faculty member's course assignments, to overlook a faculty member's poor publication record, to bolster a thin achievement record when a faculty member is up for promotion or a raise, or to remove a faculty member from the classroom because his or her selected subject matter doesn't please his or her colleagues.

An aspect of pedagogy that is an appropriate subject for discussion is assessment of learning, in particular, assessing a student's mastery and retention of specific skills and competencies taught in a particular course. The AACSB-related prescription for such assessment includes "imbedded assessment." Imbedded assessment includes the course instructor administering a pre-test and post-test and using differential performance (or a lack thereof) to ascertain whether or not the course in question is effective in educating students and which portions of the course need to be improved. Imbedded assessment also includes other assessment avenues, such as the use of (non-pre-test/post-test) rubrics to gauge semester-over-semester student improvement in critical learning objectives. In reality, other forms of assessment have long been ignored by those individual faculty who have taken it on themselves to conduct course-level assessment (because it should now be clear that there is no college-level plan for assessment) since the pre-test/post-test protocol is easy to implement and execute; additionally, this method exhausts two class meetings each and every semester, one for the pre-test and one for the post-test.

An example of one such program is outlined in the handout in Appendix A. Appendix A contains a scanned copy of a cover sheet used in conjunction with a pre-test from Charles Sawyer's ECO 336 (International Economics) course. The cover sheet clearly indicates to the student that the "Assessment Test" will be used to "document [the student's] knowledge of international economics at the start of [the] course." To examine the validity and sincerity of this pedagogical endeavor, consider the following excerpt from the USM *Undergraduate Bulletin*:

336. Survey of International Economics. 3 hrs. Prerequisites: ECO 201 and 202. An introductory study of why nations trade, tariff and nontariff barriers to trade, commercial policy, balance of payments accounting, exchange rate determination, balance of payments adjustment, and the international currency system.

Notice that the only prerequisites for ECO 336 are ECO 201 (Principles of Macroeconomics) and ECO 202 (Principles of Microeconomics). The Bulletin description for those courses follows.

201. Principles of Macroeconomics. 3 hrs. A study of a nation's economy. Topics include inflation, unemployment, gross domestic product, business cycles, and international influences. (CC 2113)

202. Principles of Microeconomics. 3 hrs. A study of market systems. Topics include supply and demand, the behavior of firms and households in different market structures, government intervention in markets, barriers to trade, and foreign exchange markets. (CC 2123)

So, ECO 201 spends some amount of time examining "international influences." ECO 202 includes discussions of "barriers to trade" and "foreign exchange markets." To determine how much time is spent on such international economics-related topics, let us examine the table of contents from a representative textbook for each course (ECO 201 and ECO 202). The following screen shot is taken from the Cengage website for N. Gregory Mankiw's widely-used text, Principles of Macroeconomics, 4th Edition.

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A close examination of chapter titles reveals that two chapters – Chapters 18 and 19 – discuss topics that could encompass international economics topics. That's 2 chapters out of 23, or about 8.7% of the entire book, dedicated to these topics. Suppose an ECO 201 instructor covered the entire book during a 15-week semester; if the course grading system were completely representative of the entire textbook, a student could score a 0% on the international topics and still earn a grade of "A" in the course. Of course, this assumes the instructor actually covers the entire textbook during a given semester. A more likely scenario is that the instructor covers Chapters 1 – 17 and then skips Chapters 18 and 19 (because they will be covered in ECO 336), resuming with Chapters 20-22, which contain fundamental macroeconomic principles material.

Examine the screen shot for the table of contents for Robert Frank and (U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman) Ben Bernanke's Principles of Macroeconomics, 2nd Edition.

Part 1 Introduction
1. Thinking Like an Economist
2. Comparative Advantage: The Basis for Exchange
3. Supply and Demand: An Introduction

Part 2 Macroeconomics: Issues and Data
4. Macroeconomics: The Bird's-Eye View of the Economy
5. Measuring Economic Activity: GDP and Unemployment
6. Measuring the Price Level and Inflation

Part 3 The Long Run
7. Economic Growth, Productivity, and Living Standards
8. Workers, Wages, and Unemployment in the Modern Economy
9. Saving and Capital Formation
10. Money and the Federal Reserve
11. Financial Markets and International Capital Flows

Part 4 The Short Run
12. Short-term Economic Fluctuations: An Introduction
13. Aggregate Demand and Output in the Short Run
14. Stabilizing Aggregate Demand: The Role of the Fed
15. Inflation and Aggregate Supply

Part 5 The International Economy
16. International Trade and Trade Policy
17. Exchange Rates and the Open Economy

In Frank and Bernanke's book, 2 chapters of 17 are dedicated to "The International Economy." In percentage terms, that's about 11.77%. Assuming complete coverage of the textbook, the course would consist of about 11.77% international coverage; assuming that the instructor covers one chapter per week during the semester, the international material never gets touched.

It should be clear that international economics is a very minor point of emphasis in these two widely-used principles of macroeconomics textbooks. Due to length of semesters, placement of international material within the textbook, and the constraints of covering more principles-centric material, it is highly likely that little or no international economics is truly taught in the ECO 201 classrooms at USM.

Now turn our attention to representative textbooks for ECO 202 (Principles of Microeconomics). Consider the following reproduction of the table of contents for Principles of Microeconomics, 8th Edition by Karl E. Case and Ray C. Fair:

Table of Contents

Notice that Case and Fair dedicate 3 of 20 chapters (or 15% of the text) to international topics. Also notice that, as in the macroeconomics texts, the international material is tucked away at the end of the book. An instructor would have to cover more than 1.17 chapters per week from Case and Fair's text just to get to the point where that instructor could spend one class period on international economics.

Examine the table of contents from another popular principles of microeconomics text, Frank and Bernanke's Principles of Microeconomics, 2nd Edition.

Contents

Part 1 Introduction
1. Thinking Like an Economist
2. Comparative Advantage: The Basis for Exchange
3. Supply and Demand: An Introduction

Part 2 Competition and the Invisible Hand
4. Elasticity
5. Demand: The Benefit Side of the Market
6. Perfectly Competitive Supply: The Cost Side of the Market
7. Efficiency and Exchange
8. The Quest for Profit and the Invisible Hand

Part 3 Market Imperfections
9. Monopoly and Other Forms of Imperfect Competition
10. Thinking Strategically
11. Externalities and Property Rights
12. The Economics of Information

Part 4 Economics of Public Policy
13. Labor Markets, Poverty, and Income Distribution
14. The Environment, Health, and Safety
15. Public Goods and Tax Policy

Part 5 International Trade
16. International Trade and Trade Policy

Those keeping score at home will note that only 1 of 16 (6.25%) of the Frank/Bernanke microeconomics text is devoted to international topics and, again, an instructor would have to cover more than one chapter per week (ignoring days missed for exams, holidays, etc.) just to reach the appropriate point in the textbook.

What should we garner from this examination? Textbook writers consider international topics of relatively little importance in comparison to more fundamental topics, and instructors would have to work very hard just to be able to cover a modicum of international material. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is actually very little coverage of international economics topics in the principles courses at USM because (1) the textbooks devote little time to those topics, (2) students need more reinforcement in the central principles of economics, and (3) an entire course exists – ECO 336 – that is devoted to international economics.

What, then, is the purpose of Sawyer's pre-test? If most students haven't truly been *exposed* to international economics material, then here's little chance that they have any real *knowledge* of international economics material. When Sawyer administered the pre-test, student scores were almost guaranteed to be low; after one semester of ECO 336, scores would almost surely have been much higher. Such a mechanism can only be designed for one purpose: to deliver a guaranteed "victory" for Sawyer's pedagogical approach. Notice that Sawyer himself states that "scores on this test will be compared to the scores on the final exam to document improvement in knowledge of international economics…." Sawyer doesn't even pay lip service to determining if improvement were

attained or to what level students improved (i.e., no improvement, some improvement, etc.). The stated assumption is that there will be improvement to document. In other words, this "assessment" appears to be a sham. Sawyer took students that he knew had little or no international economics exposure, gave them a fairly rigorous pre-test, assigned low scores, conducted a semester-long course in international economics, gave them a fairly rigorous post-test (final exam), assigned scores, and, voilà, there's proof of student learning and, by association, high quality instruction. Maybe Clooney, Pitt, and Company can pull this one off in "Ocean's 14."

Of course, this is one of the great traps inherent in imbedded assessment and why the pre-test/post-test routine really doesn't assess anything in courses like ECO 336. In a course such as Principles of Accounting, a student might learn basic rules and principles of accounting, basic elements of financial statements, debits and credits, etc. In Bloom's Taxonomy, such a course might stress Knowledge and Comprehension, the first and second levels of learning, respectively. A second accounting course might be structured to improve student learning from a Knowledge/Comprehension level to an Application/Analysis (Bloom's levels 3 and 4) level. In this case, pre-test/post-test might measure a student's accounting knowledge to document that students *know* and *comprehend* facts about accounting but that they need improvement in *application* of accounting principles and *analysis* of said principles. A post-test could reveal that the second course honed the *application*/*analysis*. Sawyer's utilization of the imbedded assessment mirrors that of many CoB faculty, who want the easiest mechanism to implement with the most positive outcome possible.

The Sawyer pre-test has another interesting angle, however. Notice that Sawyer promises each student .1 points for each correct answer. Sources tell usmnews.net reporters that Sawyer's pre-test consisted of 50 multiple choice questions, each with possible four answer choices. It is possible, then, that random guessing could produce a score of (1/4 X 50) 12.5 correct answers, resulting in the guessing student receiving 1.25 points on his or her point total. In percentage terms, that could equate to a little over .3% of the final course grade. That may not seem like much, but coupled with the curves and scales Sawyer openly boasted about, this benefit just helped Sawyer's course GPAs, and, therefore, his student evaluations.

Make no mistake, Sawyer is but one culprit in the dumbing down of USM. However, this exposé indicates the manner in which a crafty, responsibility-dodging faculty member could and can manipulate the assessment system for personal benefit. Readers may recall that Sawyer was the happy recipient of the 2005 BellSouth Award for teaching excellence. One may be certain that Sawyer's student evaluations and self-reported teaching prowess played a role in his receipt of that award. One may also be certain that bogus assessment data and inflated student evaluations supported his teaching resumé. That BellSouth Award, by the way, almost certainly guaranteed Sawyer superior teaching performance evaluations from George Carter and, therefore, a higher merit raise. Who says you can't have it all?

Appendix A: ECO 336 Pre-test Cover Sheet

ECO 336

Assessment Test

The purpose of this test is to document your current knowledge of international economics at the start of this course. The scores on this test will be compared to the scores on the final exam to document improvement in knowledge of international economics for the semester.

Students will have 0.1 point for every correct answer on this test added to their final grade total. For example, if a student answered 20 questions correctly, then 2.0 points would be added to their final grade total. If a student had 400 total points at the end of the semester, the total would be increased to 402. The result is that this test can only *improve* your final grade.