

What works and doesn't work in online economics education?

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Introduction

As many of us have experienced, the majority of schools and universities were forced to shift online during the pandemic. Many instances were abrupt, and solutions were usually decided upon based on speed of implementation. However, now that we are moving beyond the pandemic, these new modes of teaching must be discussed and evaluated. In addition to in-person teaching, online and hybrid options are now also mainstream, but we must explore further about how these new methods will affect students' development. All spheres of education must be investigated, including the skills gained, the social aspect of school, and the networks built.

Economics in particular is a subject that requires additional research. It is a subject with topics and theories that overlap STEM and humanities concepts. Many universities also incorporate introductory economics classes in many different degrees, so there is an additional challenge of catering to varying backgrounds and ways of thinking.

There are many different benefits and drawbacks to in-person, hybrid, and online instruction in teaching economics. The big question is how to reconcile all the benefits and drawbacks of each to make the best combination where students perform their best. *Teaching Economics Online*, a collection of essays edited by Dr Parama Chaudhury aims to provide insight into this question of what works and what doesn't work in online economics education. This poster includes key takeaways and highlights.

Key Takeaways

Although there are many facets to teaching economics online successfully, many chapters involve these three key themes.

1. Building a community and feeling belongingness

A feeling of belongingness can make or break a student's university experience — both socially and academically. In addition to having positive social interactions with peers, students must be confident enough in their own knowledge to engage in academic discussions. Socially-based learning is more effective than the individual alternative because discussion often requires the additional skills of negotiation and collaboration to build knowledge.

2. Interaction with academic staff

The role a lecturer or tutor takes on can influence the students' learning journey. Studies have shown that when instructors are slow to respond to issues related to the course, students are more likely to feel isolated by feeling a lack of community and care. By designing a course with a platform used at its full potential — engaging announcements, interactive posts, explicit instructions — instructors can increase dialogue and reduce the "remoteness" of distance learning.

3. Relevant learning material with real life applications

In order to improve retention, it is key to teach interesting and engaging material that is relevant to the students' own life. Connections to current events and other life increased student satisfaction since it reinforced the fact that studying economics was about understanding the world around them.

What works at UCL

ExploreEcon Conference

1. Building a community and creating a feeling of belongingness:

Previously, the website associated with the conference mostly posted announcements and introductions. Today, the website is given a wider purpose — participants are meant to interact with it before even going to the in-person part. They can post their submissions, view others', and get excited about the event. By allowing students to record, edit, and post their presentation on the website, there is less emphasis on live "elevator pitches". Students are able to put their best submission forward, which boosts confidence and gives them a more lasting presence.

2. Interaction with academic staff

One aim of the conference has always been to bring academic staff and students closer together. Previously, the conference would be held in March. Students would have 10 minutes each to present their physical posters to lecturers. Today, with the in-person part held in mid-June and posters displayed online mid-May, the staff have much more time to interact with the students' work. In addition, the website now includes "How-to" guides, recordings of live Q&As, and other resources from the staff. With this change, technology is now used as a dynamic educational tool that links both sides together.

The First Year Challenge

1. Building a community and feeling belongingness

There would be a major issue with the FYC if this point was not realized, as building community is the main intended outcome of the event. As the first project first-years are assigned, it is crucial that they receive the proper support and opportunity for developing relationships. The addition of Microsoft Teams provides a fast, organized way to make announcements. It is a more informal mode of communication, which encourages students to more easily set up in-person meetings and chat more freely.

2. Interaction with academic staff

Hosting the FYC on an online platform also allows for the opportunity for staff and students to interact more. Previously, lecturers were inundated with emails and FAQs from students. With an online central platform, lecturers can host a live, recorded Q&A to make sure all questions are addressed just once. The live aspect also allows students to put a face to the name, and feel more connected to their future teachers. On the flip side, tutors also placed in each group's private channel can supervise progress quietly and respond to queries faster.

Additional recommendations for economics educators

- Enforce introductions amongst students early on to establish a social presence, and also introduce yourself to set a positive example. Students can feel unappreciated and disengaged if they post an unacknowledged introduction.

- Provide the students the opportunity to both give and receive feedback. Besides the ongoing benefit of receiving feedback from the course instructor, it is also encouraging for students to see their suggestions implemented in real-time.

- Students who connect classroom concepts to personal experiences are shown to have higher retention of the concepts. For example, when explaining the rules and expectations of the course, instructors can tie in economics concepts such as opportunity cost and incentive.

- Protect your own time and energy during "off" hours to be your best teaching self during "on" hours. Set clear boundaries about your presence since it's impossible to teach effectively while depleted.

Chapter Highlight:

Making learning stick in online education, by Dr M Enz

How can we use science-backed concepts to implement and improve learning in an online course?

- Providing students agency in their own learning will increase motivation and allow them to own their work. The final product would come from their personal choice, activating emotions and creating a positive connection with their teacher. This in turn strengthens memory and effort, since the assignment is no longer just a checkbox on the students' to-do list.
- Experiments have shown the positive, lasting effects of interleaving on retention. Interleaving, or studying multiple topics at once rather than blocks of subjects, should be used with related but distinct material to experience its benefits.

Chapter Highlight:

Experiments for teaching economics, by Dr H Llavador

Experiments engage students more than simply memorizing theory. What are the impacts of using technology to execute them?

- Increase in students' engagement, performance, and enjoyment: Instructors can create memorable learning activities by triggering multiple senses. Not only have studies shown that students' test scores improve through performing experiments, there were also improvements in their understanding of the subject and a better attitude toward the material.
- Reduced cost and effort: There are many online platforms on which to deliver experiments, most of which are compatible with students' smartphones and laptops. Instructions on how to run these experiments on popular platforms such as *classEx* and *MobLab* are also becoming more widely available.

Chapter Highlight:

Team based learning, by Dr P Ruder

What factors are necessary for a high-quality online educational experience?

- High level of social and cognitive presence from the students: Sustained efforts to construct meaning from classwork plus opportunities for the students to express their own knowledge will result in a culture of individual accountability.