

Engagement, Empathy and Communication – Teaching Economics to Business Students

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DEE, Friday 13 September 2019






What issues can arise from teaching Economics to Business Students?

- ▶ Lower module evaluation scores and negative comments
 - ▶ “Why do I have to study economics?”
 - ▶ “Economics is boring”
 - ▶ Disengaged or disinterested students
 - ▶ Frustrated students and staff

 - ▶ Solutions?
 - ▶ Dumb it down – just teach a “light version”
 - ▶ Complaining and trying to hand over module to the next new member of staff
 - ▶ These “solutions” are often unsuccessful
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Objectives of the presentation

- Identifying and understanding the sources of the issues
 - Suggesting interventions to mitigate the issues:
 - By recognising differences between economics and business students, it is possible to create an environment that facilitates empathy
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Introducing the Tourist Analogy:

- Analogous to the emotions that business students may feel when studying economics is that of a tourist away from home
- There are different types of tourist
 - Different people with heterogeneous preferences and different characteristics
- Holiday destinations differ from home
 - Different language, different traditions, “trip into the unknown”
- In such an environment tourist guides / travel agents can play an important role in helping tourists to acclimatise



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What makes business students different? Getting to know the tourists!

- ▶ Different academic background of business students:
 - ▶ Less importance of mathematical foundation of business students (excl. finance students)
- ▶ Other differences
 - ▶ Potentially more clearly-defined career paths (especially on vocationally-focused courses, e.g. accounting or marketing)
 - ▶ More vocational focus
 - ▶ Real world applications
 - ▶ Better understanding of the inner workings or functions of firms (black box for economist).
 - ▶ Better understanding of accountancy practices
 - ▶ Expectation of immediate application
 - ▶ More focused on business rather than consumer welfare (Neymotin, 2014)
 - ▶ How does the macro-economic environment affect firms but not vice versa



Anxiety



- ▶ Ex-ante expectations and perceptions
- ▶ E.g. Economics is difficult, mathematical, irrelevant to real world, full of diagrams
- ▶ Many students already have anxieties before entering a lecture room the first time! I.e. maths, statistics, foreign language and research methods anxieties (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999)
- ▶ Relationship between empathy and anxiety
- ▶ Commercialisation: Amplification of anxieties
 - ▶ Students' expectations of getting high mark amplify problem of a non-core module that is perceived as difficult



Cognitivism & Constructivism



- **Conflict of traditions**

- It is easier to understand and deal with material that is presented in a familiar way
 - Students struggle with abstraction and aggregation
 - Increased frustration

- **Conflict of motivations**

- Students engage more when material is put into context, they can empathise with material




Interventions



- First step: GET TO KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE!
- This helps to
 - (i) identify suitable module topics,
 - (ii) identify appropriate framing, discourse and tools
 - (ii) choose appropriate teaching approaches and
 - (iii) select effective assessments
- Information about students from:
 - Benchmark statement
 - Programme directors




Further interventions

- ▶ Creating empathy!
 - ▶ Ensure relevance of topics taught
 - ▶ Less is more
 - ▶ Adjust teaching and assessment activities to audience
 - ▶ Choose the right assessment
- 



Summary and outlook:

- ▶ A main cause of conflict is the lack of empathy from students as well as staff
 - ▶ Empathy has to start with staff.
 - ▶ Through encouraging students to engage with module, they can also develop empathy towards our subject
 - ▶ Ways to ensure a smooth journey:
 - ▶ Get to know your audience
 - ▶ Ensure relevance of topics taught
 - ▶ Less is more
 - ▶ Adjust teaching tools to audience
 - ▶ Choose the right assessment
- 



Thanks for listening!



Any Questions?

