Bringing Active Learning into High School Economics: Some Examples from *The Simpsons*

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Bringing Active Learning into High School Economics: Some Examples from *The Simpsons*

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Abstract

In this brief educational note, we provide several examples of directed classroom activities for the high school economics classroom using the long-running television show *The Simpsons*. In doing so, we provide an overview of the scholarly literature on using popular culture to teach economics. Our examples highlight how popular culture can be successfully employed at the secondary level to engage and teach students through active learning. We conclude with some thoughts for secondary social studies teachers looking to enhance economic instruction.

Keywords: Economic Pedagogy, Student Engagement Techniques,

JEL Codes: A22, D01
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1 Introduction

Scholars have long been interested in economic education at the high school level (Walstad and Soper 1988; Becker et al. 1990). In recent years a number of great background resources have been developed for high school teachers of economics. For example, the edited volume by Schug and Wood (2011) provide a number of ways to make economics “cool in school.” Similarly, Schug et al. (2015) provide three important episodes in American economic history that secondary social studies teachers can use to teach costs, incentives, and the economic way of thinking. The availability of scholarship like this has allowed high school social studies teachers to enhance their economic instruction and provide students with a better contextual understanding of the historical development of the U.S. economy.

Sometimes, however, it is better to teach economic concepts disengaged from real-world situations (Gillis and Hall 2010). While there are many pedagogical reasons for moving away from history or current events, an important reason is that student engagement is necessary for successful learning and one way to arouse engagement is by using references to culture and multimedia in the classroom. These references play a role of storytelling and storytelling has been recognized as a great tool for helping students connect the new material to what they already know (Salemi 2002; Barkley 2009; Heath and Heath 2007; Gottschall 2012; Brown and McDaniel 2014). There are additional benefits to using references to culture and multimedia. First, as shown by cognitive and
neuroscience literature, using examples from creative arts facilitates activation of neurological pathways that support the transfer of information from short- to long-term memory (Davis 2015). In this regard, using the Simpsons in the economics classroom has been shown to have a positive impact on student learning, especially for students on the lower end of grade distribution (Chu 2014). Second, using multimedia in the classroom makes our profession more approachable, it helps “rectify the image of economics” (Geerling 2012) in the minds of students.

In this brief educational note we provide an overview of the scholarly literature on using popular culture to teach economics. While this literature has primarily been focused on the college level, we feel that it can be successfully employed at the secondary level to engage and teach students through active learning. We then provide several examples of directed or supported classroom activities utilizing examples from the long-running television show The Simpsons. We then conclude with some thoughts for secondary social studies teachers looking to enhance their economic instruction.

2 Popular Culture and Active Learning

At first economists lagged in adopting new engagement techniques and instead relied heavily on conventional methods such as “chalk and talk” (Becker and Watts 1995; Becker and Watts 1996; Becker 1997; Becker and Watts 2001; Watts and Becker 2008). However, in the recent years, economists begun to design and experiment with a variety of diverse engagement techniques. For example, many suggest using various collections of TV and movie clips to illustrate basic economic concepts in principles classes (Leet
and Houser 2003; Mateer 2004; Mateer, Ghent, and Stone 2011) and more advanced concepts in upper level courses (Dixit 2005; Diamond 2009; Mateer and Stephenson 2011). In contrast to relying on collections of illustrations from multiple sources, other authors suggest building the classroom experience around one source of examples. The Simpsons are among the most popular sources (Hall 2005; Gillis and Hall 2010; Luccasen and Thomas 2010; Hall 2014), followed by the Harry Potter movies and book series (Podemska-Mikalich and Deyo 2014; Podemska-Mikluch, Deyo, and Mitchell 2015), Seinfeld (Ghent, Grant, and Lesica 2011; Dixit 2012) and The Drew Carey Show (Holian 2011).

While clips from popular movies and TV shows occupy a prominent place in the economic education literature, innovative engagement techniques are not limited to the usage of clips (Ferrarini 2012). Authors also recommend using such atypical tools as comic strips, music, and podcasts (Lawson 2006; Lawson, Hall, and Mateer 2008; Hall 2012; Van Horn and Van Horn 2013; Luther 2015) as well as encouraging students to become producers of economic content in their first economic course (Hall and Podemska-Mikalich 2015).

The publication of the edited volume Homer Economicus: The Simpsons and Economics (Hall 2014), combined with its longevity and breadth, make The Simpsons an ideal show for high school teachers to use in their classrooms to enhance understanding of some basic economic concepts. The following examples were developed and used in a large comprehensive high school in the state of New York where economics is a requirement for graduation and is a half-year course. The class size was 23 students, although these activities could be used in smaller classes and classes up to 40 students.
3 Assignments Appropriate for the Secondary Classroom

In this section we present information on several structured assignments using *The Simpsons* television show. Information is provided on the economic concepts that are being highlighted, *The Simpsons* episodes used, and the details of the assignment so that other instructors might adapt them to their own use. All of these activities were used during class time towards the end of the semester. These activities coincided with students learning about prices in a market economy. The students had previously learned about the laws of supply and demand and the focus of this section and activities was to be able to synthesize that knowledge so that they better understood prices and how they are determined by manufacturers, stores etc. The clips, coupled with the accompanied questions also covered the topics of excess supply and finding market equilibrium. With supply and demand and market coordination under their belt, we were able to move on to other related topics in markets.

3.1 Prices, Markets Equilibrium, and Excess Supply

**Episode(s) Used:** “Bart Gets an Elephant” and “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?”

Students watched the portion of the episode in which Bart receives the elephant and the family’s initial response to having Stampy the Elephant, which included setting prices to see/ride the elephant. We stopped watching the clip right after Homer adjusted his prices after Marge informed him how much it actually cost to take care of an elephant. In the second episode we watched about the last five minutes of the episode which included Homer designing “The Homer” and the unveiling of the car and its price. The clip was
stopped as Herb Powell sees his car company being sold to a Japanese company due to the failure of “The Homer”

**Activity:** The students worked independently to answer questions 1-3 before we watched the episode. As a class we then discussed their answers. After the discussion I played the episodes and students answered the next set of questions. We discussed them as a class and students handed in their responses for a grade.

**Chapter Preview Activity**

**EQ: How do you know when the price is “right”?**

Think of a product you recently purchased. On a scrap sheet of paper or in your notes, record the name of the product and the approximate price you paid. Then answer these questions.

1. What are some reasons you were willing to buy the product at this price?
2. What are some reasons the seller was willing to sell the product at this price?
3. Do you think you paid the “right” price for this product? Why or why not?

**Pricing & The Simpsons – As you watch the clips think about the following questions.**

1. What are some reasons why the citizens of Springfield were willing to pay Homer’s prices?
2. What are some reasons that Homer was willing to charge these prices?
3. Do you think people paid the “right” price for the services? Why or Why not?
4. Why does Homer change his prices? What affect does that have on the consumers?
5. Do people have the right to be upset when he raises his prices? Why or Why not?
6. After watching both clips from The Simpsons, describe the state of the market in each episode. Support your claim with evidence from the episodes and your text.
7. After watching both clips from The Simpsons, describe what type of excess each producer is facing. Why is that? How can they fix it?

3.2 Behavioral Economics – Nudging and Framing

**Episode(s) Used:** “Homer and Apu” and “The Class Struggle in Springfield”
The class watches the first ten minutes of “Homer and Apu” as Apu’s business practices running the Kwik E Mart etc. are examples of nudging. The episode is stopped right after Apu put the corn cans on the counter, which increased Bart and Lisa’s demand for corn. “The Class Struggle in Springfield” is watched from the beginning until Marge decides to buy a Chanel dress because of its deeply discounted price.

**Activity:** In class the previous day we discussed why stores are laid out the way they are (i.e. grocery stores have the milk all the way in the back of the store). Prior to watching the episode the students completed the right had side of the chart and we discussed their examples.

**Behavioral Economics Mini Lesson**

**Nudges & Framing**

Nudge theory is a concept in behavioral science, political theory and economics that argues that positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions to try to achieve non-forced compliance can influence the motives, incentives and decision making of groups and individuals, at least as effectively – if not more. Framing theory and the concept of framing bias suggests that how something is presented (the “frame”) influences the choices people make.

**Nudge**

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<th>Examples from The Simpsons</th>
<th>Examples from the real world</th>
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**Framing**

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3.3 **Self Interest**
**Episode Used:** “Marge, the Gamer”

In class, the entire episode could be watched as all the storylines could be related to self-interest. For example, Homer learns the rules of the game to be a better referee, while Lisa gets Homer to be a bad referee that calls things in her favor.

**Activity:** Before watching the episode, students answer questions one and two and then discussed them as a class. The instructor should specifically go over the definition of self-interest before watching the episode so it is fresh in the minds of students as they watch the show and think about Question 3. As a follow-up, students wrote a short paper using the prompts provided. Encouragement was given to use examples from *The Simpsons* to support their arguments.

**Markets and Self-Interest**

1. A market is an arrangement that allows buyers and sellers to exchange things. Why do markets exist?
2. What comes to mind when you hear the term self-interest?
3. Watch the clip from *The Simpsons*. What connection can you make between the clip and economics?

**HW Assignment – Self-Interest**

Definitions: Self-interest – One’s own personal gain

Competition – The struggle among producers for the dollars of consumers

Think about what you plan to do after high school graduation. Will you get a job, go to college, enlist in the military, travel, or start your own business? After thinking for a few minutes, answer the questions below on a separate sheet of paper.

Paragraph #1 – Write a paragraph about how your choices are motivated by self-interest.

Paragraph #2 Think about the specifics of your choices. Which college? Where will you travel? What kind of job or business? Explain how these choices are also motivated by self-interest.

Paragraph #3 Explain how your self-interest might also be affected by competition.

3.4 Economics of Real Life – Legalization of Gambling

**Episode Used:** “Springfield (or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Legalized Gambling)”
The entire episode is on the topic of the economics of the legalization of gambling so the full episode was watched in class.

**Activity:** The students were given three articles on the legalization of gambling to read to fill in the left hand portion of the below charts. The first was a local article from a newspaper on the legalization of gambling. The second article was the article from the *Los Angeles Times* that inspired the writers of *The Simpsons* to write the Springfield episode (Booth 1992). The third article provided was a journal article discussing the proliferation of Indian casinos over the past decade (Swift 2014). The articles were read for homework and we discussed them as a class before watching the episode. Afterwards, the students wrote a 1-2 page position paper on the topic of legalized gambling and whether they supported a casino being built in town.

### Economics in Real Life Case Study
#### The Economics of Casino Gambling

Directions: Read the articles handed out in class. As you read, write down evidence that is related to the economic benefits and costs of casino legalization. Make sure that the evidence collected relates to the criteria given. After you have finished reading we will watch an episode of *The Simpsons* that addresses the issue of casino gambling. Complete your chart with evidence from the episode.

Before reading & viewing: Do you agree or disagree with the legalization of gambling/casinos? Support your claim.

**Economic Benefits from Casino Legalization**

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<tr>
<th>Economic Benefit</th>
<th>Examples from Articles</th>
<th>Examples from <em>The Simpsons</em> episode</th>
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<td>Tax Revenues</td>
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<td>Employment</td>
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<td>Consumer Choice &amp; Increased Variety</td>
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Economic and Social Costs from Casinos

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<tr>
<th>Economic/Social Costs</th>
<th>Examples from Articles</th>
<th>Examples from <em>The Simpsons</em> episode</th>
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<td>Moral Objections to Gambling</td>
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<td>Industry Cannibalization</td>
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<td>Crime</td>
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<td>Negative Externalities &amp; Problem Gambling</td>
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After reading & viewing: Do you agree or disagree with the legalization of gambling/casinos? Support your claim.

Did your opinion change? Why or Why Not? (Please note the piece of evidence that either solidified your thinking or changed it)

Expand your opinion into a 1-2 page position paper on the issue of casino gambling. Support your position with multiple pieces of evidence.

**Paragraph One – Issue and Position**

Utilize this paragraph to clearly outline the main problems associated with the topic. The point of the paragraph is to provide a basic foundation as to the current situation associated with your topic. This section of your position paper should not exceed five to six sentences.

**Paragraph Two – Detailed Background Information**

This paragraph is an opportunity for you to show the depth of your knowledge about the past and current situations regarding the topic. Be sure to discuss:

- Historical origin of the problem, particularly why the problem arose
- Previous actions related to the topic
• Successes and failures of past actions and why they succeeded or failed
• Problems that continue to exist or ones that have not yet been addressed

Devoting two to three sentences per item on this list should allow you to have sufficiently discussed the topic and to set the foundations for the final paragraph of your position paper.

**Paragraph Three – Your Opinion on the Issue**

This paragraph is the one that will set your paper apart from the others. After identifying the issues in paragraph two, utilize this paragraph to list your thoughts on the issues enumerated above. The quality of your argument could be a great determinant in the overall evaluation of your position paper. Some items to consider

• Specific proposals regarding the issue
• How it could be implemented, including the feasibility
• Impact of building a casino or not

### 3.5 Characteristics of a Free Market Economy

**Episode Used:** “Husbands and Knives”

Watch in class from the beginning of the episode at The Android’s Dungeon up until the point where Marge’s gym opens in the space that formerly housed The Android’s Dungeon.

**Activity:** Have the students read independently the features of a system of free enterprise provided below. Once the students are done, briefly discuss the concepts to make sure they understand each one before starting the episode. After the conclusion of the clip, have the students discuss in small groups what they found as examples of a free enterprise system at work. Possibly reconvene as the entire class to discuss more in-depth.

**Features of American Free Enterprise**

Free enterprise in America is founded on ideas so basic to our culture that we tend to take them for granted. As you watch the clip from *The Simpsons*, write down an example of each characteristic as seen in the episode. For homework, explain on the back of your paper what the government does to protect each feature.

**Economic Freedom:** In the United States, individuals have the right to choose their occupations and to work wherever they can find jobs. Businesses can make their own
decisions on whom to hire, what to produce, how much to produce and how much to charge for their products and services. The government generally does not interfere in these decisions.

**Competition**: Producers have the right to engage in rivalries to gain business. Competing producers have an incentive to create new and better products. This gives consumers more economic choices.

**Private Property**: Individuals and businesses have the right to buy and sell as much property as they want. Property owners may prohibit others from using their property.

**Contracts**: Individuals and businesses have the right to make agreements to buy and sell goods. Such contracts may be written or oral. They are legally binding.

**Voluntary Exchange**: Consumers and producers may freely buy and sell goods when the opportunity costs of such exchanges are worthwhile. In a voluntary exchange, both parties expect to gain from the transaction.

**Self-Interest**: Consumers and producers may make decisions on the basis of their own benefit. Their decisions do not have to benefit or please the government or other consumers and producers.

**Profit Motive**: American free enterprise is driven by the desire for profit, the gain that occurs during financial dealings. Profit is a powerful incentive that leads entrepreneurs and businesses to accept the risk of business failure.

### 4 Concluding Thoughts

In this brief pedagogical note we provide detail on some assignments designed to teach economics to high schoolers through the television show *The Simpsons*. It is important to note that these assignments should be used in addition to traditional instruction. To teach economics well at the secondary level, teachers have to focus on a few core concepts and give the students many opportunities to hear, discuss, and use the ideas in order for them to stick. In the words of the famous social scientist Herbert Spencer (1978), “…only by varied iteration can alien conceptions be forced on reluctant minds.”
In our experience, when students sometimes struggle with a particular abstract concept, fictional examples give a concreteness that help students sort through the issues. For example, students often struggle with questions related to price in a market versus prices set by businesses. They don’t, in the abstract, understand all of the decisions and factors that influence a price for a product and how a seller would know they are making a profit. After watching *The Simpsons* episode “Bart Gets an Elephant,” however, students seem to have a much better understanding of prices and the price mechanism. If a seller is selling their product at a price that is too low, they will be running their business at a loss like Homer. If they suddenly change their prices to reflect their costs, they risk losing their business as Homer. This highlights for them how even items that can be sold for a high price can lose money if the costs of providing that good or service are high enough.
References


