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FEATURES AND INFORMATION

Starting Point: Pedagogic Resources for Teaching and Learning Economics

Mark H. Maier, KimMarie McGoldrick, and Scott P. Simkins

This article describes Starting Point: Teaching and Learning Economics, a Web-based portal that makes innovative pedagogic resources and effective teaching practices easily accessible to economists. Starting Point introduces economists to teaching innovations through 16 online modules, each containing a general description of a specific pedagogic method, theory and evidence supporting effective use of the method, classroom implementation guides, and a library of economics-based examples that illustrate use of the teaching method. In addition, each module includes an online form allowing faculty to contribute their own classroom-based teaching examples to the examples library.

Keywords *pedagogy, resources, teaching innovations*

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WHAT IS STARTING POINT?

Starting Point: Teaching and Learning Economics (<http://serc.carleton.edu/econ/index.html>) is a Web-based pedagogic portal that brings together in a single location comprehensive support for implementing 16 different learning-centered teaching practices in economics courses. Three primary goals lie behind its development: (1) reducing the costs of pedagogic innovation in economics; (2) introducing economists to new pedagogic practices originally developed outside of economics; and (3) promoting the sharing of pedagogic innovations across disciplines.

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The results of economic education research, including best classroom teaching practices, are regularly shared at regional and national economics conferences, in published books and articles on economic education, and on a few discipline-based teaching Web sites. Paralleling this dissemination of economic education research has been a series of national teacher-training workshops in economics (Salemi, Saunders, and Walstad 1996; Goodman, Maier, and Moore 2003; Salemi and Walstad 2010). Nonetheless, pedagogic resources in economics remain widely scattered, increasing search costs for instructors interested in adapting new teaching practices in their courses. Starting Point provides a uniquely comprehensive pedagogic resource, in terms of both breadth and depth of coverage. Economics instructors can quickly find information describing the 16 pedagogies, research-based evidence for their use, detailed explanations on how to implement the pedagogies in their classrooms, and a library of examples that can immediately be adapted for in-class use in a wide variety of economics courses.¹

Starting Point not only provides economists with a one-stop pedagogic resource, but also brings together pedagogic innovations from a variety of sources. For example, economic experiments, used by economists in classroom teaching and grounded in path-breaking economic research, are highlighted on the site. In addition, three less-well-known (to economists), research-based pedagogic practices developed initially for physics education—context-rich problems, just-in-time teaching, and interactive lecture demonstrations—are included on the site, adapted for use in economics.² A number of other pedagogies previously adopted in economics, for example, classroom response systems and cooperative learning, are also included. In these cases Starting Point connects their use in economics to educational and learning sciences research advances and instructional best practices from across the academy.

Starting Point was developed in collaboration with the Science Education Resource Center (SERC) at Carleton College (MN), a leader in creating Web-based content-management software that makes pedagogic modules developed by SERC partners accessible on the Web via a pedagogic database. Originally developed for the geosciences, this pedagogic database now supports a discipline-generic *Pedagogy in Action* Web portal that includes pedagogic modules for over 40 teaching methods.³ Of the 16 Starting Point pedagogic modules, 9 were newly created and became part of SERC's comprehensive pedagogic library, while 7 involved extensive revisions of existing SERC pedagogic modules and replaced those modules in the broader *Pedagogy in Action* pedagogic library. A unique feature of this project is that all 16 modules were developed by interdisciplinary team, including economic educators and pedagogic experts from other disciplines. In total, the project involved 75 contributors working together in module development teams at SERC in 2009 and 2010. The resulting 16 modules included in Starting Point, along with the module coordinators, are listed in table 1.

STARTING POINT: AN INTENTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZING, ACCESSING, AND SHARING PEDAGOGIC INFORMATION

While published research on economics education tends to focus on the efficacy of a single teaching method, Starting Point was intentionally designed to promote the use of a broad range of effective pedagogic practices. The Starting Point site is organized into pedagogic modules, each providing a full range of information needed to successfully implement a specific teaching practice. Each module shares a common structure, including the following sections:

TABLE 1
16 Starting Point Modules and Their Development Coordinators

Module	Coordinator Name, Institution
Teaching with Cases	Ann Velenchik, Wellesley College
Classroom Experiments	Sheryl Ball, Virginia Tech University
Classroom Response Systems	Joseph Calhoun, Florida State University
Teaching with Computer Simulations	Betty Blecha, San Francisco State University
Context-Rich Problems	Joann Bangs, St. Catherine University
Cooperative Learning	KimMarie McGoldrick, University of Richmond
Documented Problem Solving	Linda Wilson, The University of Texas at Arlington
Interactive Lectures	Gail Hoyt, University of Kentucky
Interactive Lecture Demonstrations	Mark Maier, Glendale Community College
Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching	Arthur H. Goldsmith, Washington and Lee University
Just-in-Time Teaching	Scott Simkins, North Carolina A&T State University
Quantitative Writing	Steven A. Greenlaw, University of Mary Washington
Service Learning	Andrea Ziegert, Denison University
Teaching with Spreadsheets	Miles B. Cahill, College of the Holy Cross
Undergraduate Student Research	Elizabeth Perry-Sizemore, Randolph College
Using Media to Enhance Teaching and Learning	Dirk Mateer, Penn State University

- *What is . . .* : describes the practice and its distinguishing features;
- *Why use . . .* : includes research-based evidence supporting use of the practice;
- *How to Use . . .* : emphasizes pedagogic goals, classroom use, and practical tips;
- *Examples . . .* : provides a searchable library of ready-to-use practice-specific activities.

The comprehensive nature of the site, coupled with a uniform framework, makes it particularly easy for instructors to access relevant information. For example, both new and experienced instructors can use Starting Point to deepen their understanding of a particular pedagogic practice, as well as find economics examples (in the Examples section) that they can immediately use in their classes.⁴ The latter is a particularly powerful feature of Starting Point. Examples are designed specifically for ease of adaptation and also incorporate a common format that includes the following information: brief summary, description of learning goals, context for use, teaching materials, assessment ideas, and references. In addition, the examples are designed to draw the user back into the module to check or enhance his/her understanding of the relevant pedagogic practice.

Starting Point also gives economics instructors an opportunity to share their own classroom-based examples and contribute to a broader pedagogic conversation. In a recent reevaluation of the economics major, Colander and McGoldrick (2009) identified the development of a “teaching commons” as one way to promote more active pedagogic practices in the field. Starting Point seeks to function as a type of teaching commons for economics instructors, a place where instructors come not only to benefit from others’ examples, but also to contribute their own activities to the Starting Point Examples library.⁵ Such contributions have practical advantages for faculty as well because they are consistent with the scholarship of teaching (Boyer 1990) and may provide evidence to be used in faculty promotion and tenure portfolios.

WHY USE STARTING POINT? PROMOTING PEDAGOGIC CHANGE TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING

Research results from the cognitive and learning sciences make it clear that intentional use of learner-centered, interactive teaching practices improves student learning (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). Economic education research, as published in this journal and elsewhere, generally supports the use of such teaching practices. Indeed, a number of them have been highlighted in a series of discipline-based teaching initiatives in economics over the past 40 years, including the recently completed NSF-supported Teaching Innovations Program (Salemi and Walstad 2010). Nonetheless, discipline-based surveys suggest that economics instruction has shifted only slightly from the dominant lecture format over the past decade (Becker and Watts 2008). Why? Adopting new teaching methods is a costly process. It takes time to learn about new pedagogies, adjust teaching practices, and prepare activities and assessments that are consistent with the new practices. These marginal costs are real and up-front and take away from alternative activities such as research. Thus, for many instructors, the odds are stacked against pedagogic change. Starting Point is designed to reduce the costs of adopting and adapting research-based pedagogic innovations and thereby increase the chances that instructors will implement these teaching practices in their classrooms.⁶

Starting Point offers a one-stop pedagogic portal, saving economics instructors valuable time in searching for information on effective teaching pedagogies and high-quality classroom examples. For instructors seeking ready-to-use material for a specific pedagogic technique that can be incorporated into their next class, the Example pages—searchable by content area—provide a full set of resources, including student handouts and instructor guides, as well as information about the appropriate class size, time needed to complete the activity, and level of prerequisite knowledge. For instructors who are exploring alternative pedagogies, the Starting Point navigation provides a common format (What is . . . ? Why use . . . ? How to use . . . ?) that reduces the learning curve associated with finding and evaluating a wide range of innovative teaching techniques.⁷

WE BUILT IT, BUT WILL THEY (YOU) COME?

Will economists use the comprehensive collection of pedagogic resources available in Starting Point? In fall 2009, Paul Grimes, one of the two external evaluators for the Starting Point project, conducted a Web-based survey of multiple online communities likely to be early adopters of Starting Point resources. Grimes (2009) found significant use of instructor-centered, lecture-based teaching practices, consistent with discipline-wide surveys conducted over the last decade (Becker and Watts 2008). However, 20 percent of respondents reported that they were dissatisfied with their “current overall approach to teaching undergraduate economics” (Grimes 2009, 4). Yet nearly 40 percent of survey respondents believe that significant barriers exist against economists’ efforts to integrate alternative pedagogies into their classrooms. Most frequently cited among those barriers was the opportunity cost of time to learn and adopt new teaching practices. A key objective of Starting Point is reducing instructors’ time costs associated with adopting new teaching practices, while also increasing the potential for increasing student learning in economics.

Preliminary statistics indicate that in its first year, Starting Point generated significant interest. Between June 2010 and June 2011, there were over 13,000 unique visitors to the site, and each available module had at least 2,000 unique page views. About three-quarters of the traffic came from users directly entering the top level of the site. About one-quarter came from search engine referral. The most-viewed modules included the following teaching practices: cooperative learning, student research, quantitative writing, and context-rich problems, each with more than 4,000 unique page views. The most viewed examples were “Research Paper in Introductory Economics” (undergraduate research module), “Think Pair Share to Teach Supply and Demand” (cooperative learning module), and “Perfect Competition” (context-rich problem module). These data suggest that there is substantial interest in Starting Point resources, especially for core content in introductory courses.

CONCLUSION

Starting Point brings together a wide variety of research-based pedagogic resources for economics instructors in a purposeful and organized manner and allows economics instructors to share successful examples of pedagogic practice with their peers. Our aim is to make it easier for economics instructors to learn about and implement teaching strategies that previous research has shown to be effective at improving student learning—both in economics and other disciplines. Starting Point will broaden economists’ knowledge of effective teaching practices, and by reducing the time cost of acquiring information about why and how to use these practices in their own courses, will encourage their adaptation and implementation. We believe that providing a library of easily accessible classroom-tested examples will help spur ongoing educational innovation in economics—at both the individual and discipline levels—and encourage wider adoption of teaching practices that promote active student engagement in the learning process. Ultimately, our hope is that greater use of such teaching practices will lead to noticeable improvements in student learning in economics.

NOTES

1. While Starting Point was developed with face-to-face classroom teaching in mind, many of the teaching practices discussed on the site can be easily adapted to online teaching.
2. Simkins and Maier (2011) illustrate the adaptability of these and other pedagogies for economics education.
3. See <http://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/pedagogies.html>.
4. Research for a similar pedagogic portal (Iverson, Fox, and Manduca 2006) indicates that instructors are as likely to enter the site in search of ready-to-use examples for an upcoming class as they are to obtain teaching information.
5. Information about contributing examples to Starting Point is available at http://serc.carleton.edu/econ/about_submit_activities. Example submissions are reviewed before being accepted for inclusion in the site.
6. Each Starting Point module is grounded on well-established learning sciences research and, in most cases, draws on empirical evidence indicating learning gains in economics or other disciplines.
7. This structure, proven effective by SERC through more than a decade of experience, has led over one-third of all college-level geoscience instructors to use the pedagogic modules in the Starting Point:

Teaching Entry Level Geoscience pedagogic portal, an analogue to the Starting Point: Teaching and Learning Economics site (Iverson, Manduca, and Fox 2008).

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