Case Study 4: The Flipped Classroom in Postgraduate Economics

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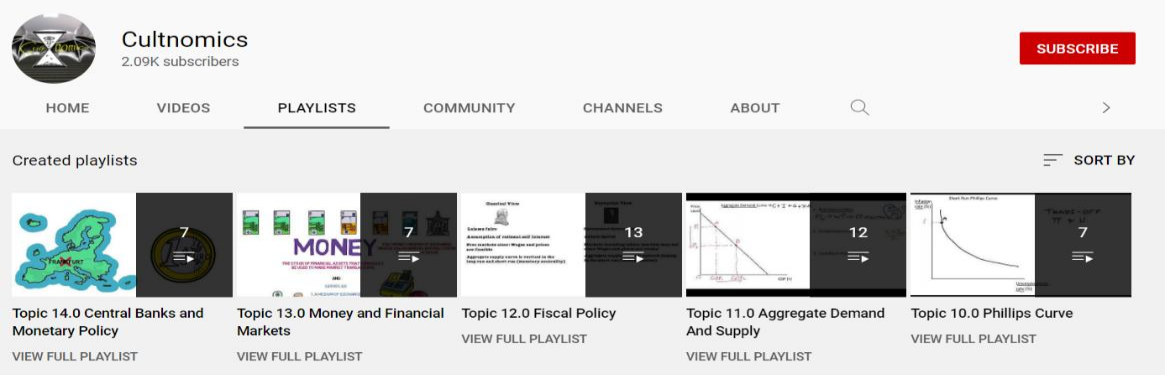
Introduction and Context:

A perennial issue faced by educators of technical subjects in traditional didactic-based modes of teaching is that modules are generally teacher-centred, heavily content driven and involve passive learning, based on slide delivery. Economics at the postgraduate level has particularly suffered from student dissatisfaction with the breadth and depth of technical content which must be absorbed in a short period of time (generally delivered in block format) and this has led to surface level knowledge of content applied to real world issues only in a limited fashion, information overload, and poor learning outcomes. In addition, where English is a second language, this type of traditional lecture style experience can be particularly difficult and oftentimes learners can become disengaged early in the process which makes it extremely difficult in future classes as learning tends to build iteratively.
During the reporting period, some postgraduate Economics modules were redesigned and redelivered via the Flipped Classroom method, enabled by enhanced digital technologies available in NCI. This approach was introduced to overcome learner dissatisfaction with the approach to Economics teaching at a postgraduate level, to increase the learning outcomes and standardise the level of content provided, to move towards an active rather than passive teaching approach and to increase the depth of learner understanding of content and to enhance its application to real world issues.

Summary of the Initiative:

The flipped learning approach was deployed for the first time to deliver economic content to learners inside and outside the classroom. Classroom learning was inverted, and learners were provided with module material prior to the class in the form of original and bespoke digital video content, in addition to selected readings and original revision exercises. Classroom time was then dedicated to deeper learning and cognitive thinking in the form of discussions with peers and problem-based application of material to innovative and current real-world business case studies.
In order to facilitate and enhance the use of the flipped learning approach, the lecturer created a digital suite of video resources covering the key theoretical content of postgraduate economics. This involved the development of a YouTube companion channel which explained concepts and theories in a digestible manner and at a suitable academic level. This channel currently contains over 130 original videos and was created using a diverse range of software.

Example of content from Cultnomics Economics YouTube channel



The development of supplementary digital resources has facilitated and encouraged a personalised and inclusive learning environment with high levels of classroom interaction where the learning dynamic has become active rather than passive. This approach has engendered individualism of teaching style whereby the speed of classroom learning is adjusted to suit individual learning needs. During this process, learners are expected to become self-directed, active investigators and problem solvers working either individually or in small collaborative groups to identify key issues and problems within business case studies and evaluate potential solutions/strategies for decision-making guided by the classroom facilitator. The channel has the additional benefit of standardisation of economic content in NCI ensuring a minimum standard of content rather than the variable quality of online sources.

Key Findings and Impact:

Learner feedback on the flipped classroom approach to teaching economics at the postgraduate level in the NCI has been positive and the level of critique and application evident in student assessments are of a higher quality following the change to the learning approach. In-classroom engagement has been elevated to a far higher level than previously and the learner experience seems to have improved based on Learner testimony and feedback (evidence provided below).

Learner testimony

- *Students were given videos to understand the course content and then there were some practice sessions held to gauge if the students understood what they as being taught in the videos. It's a really intuitive way of learning and students really enjoy it*
- *Paul's YouTube videos and how he gave us individual attention during class was a great help. His style of teaching eased us and we were always comfortable to ask him questions when in doubt*
- *My favourite module to date. Paul was engaging and extremely organised. His videos were also brilliant to get an overview of new concepts. A clear knowledge of expectations was great to have*
- *His YouTube channel, Cultnomics, was of great help and I'm not sure what I would've done without it; a great idea. Lecture and tutorial material was very well put together.*
- *Pauls YouTube channel was great as I could refresh old topics at my own pace.*
- *Very technical content delivered in a considered and detailed manner. YouTube videos very helpful.*

Conclusion

The flipped classroom approach offers a flexible and active style of learning for technical subject matter where application of material to the real world is of prime importance. The development of digital teaching materials such as bespoke module-based videos facilitates this blend of asynchronous student-centred learning. It provides flexibility for students to study at their own pace and facilitates more dynamic modes of interaction and engagement in the application of theory to real world issues. This approach is particularly appropriate for teaching Economics at the postgraduate level where delivery is often provided in condensed block format.

It must also be recognised that this approach – like any major pedagogical innovation - takes time, effort and resources to create the digital content to enable a flipped classroom approach for technical subject matter. This can be onerous. Shared resource content creation among a group of staff members would expand the scope of material created and aid in standardising the content across Programmes. Learner 'buy-in' can be difficult at the outset of a module. The flipped learning approach necessitates learners investing time outside the classroom and engaging with videos and readings to prepare for the more active problem-based learning during classroom time. It is vital to provide learners with clear instructions (in-person as well as in writing) prior to the commencement of the module, in addition to highlighting the importance of preparation and independent work.