

Econ Beats: A Semester Long, Interdisciplinary, Project-Based Learning Assignment

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Abstract

Innovative teaching in economic education has used media, music, and popular culture. We provide educators with a semester-long, interdisciplinary, collaborative, active learning project called *Econ Beats*. The project requires students from Economics to work with media students over an entire semester to create a music video that explains economic content. The highlight of project is a public screening that showcases students' projects. We provide a blue print to educators on how to best incorporate the assignment and plan the event. The project brings attention to economics, and is a way to engage the community.

Introduction

Today's employers expect that students graduating with a college degree are equipped with the skills to tackle complex real-world problems (Steiner and Laws 2006). The education system had previously attempted to prepare students by creating discipline-specialized graduates (Remington-Doucette 2013). While specialized students are better equipped for success in graduate school, they might not be as prepared to work in areas that require exposure to varied skills and knowledge. A more comprehensive education system allows students to be exposed to a variety of skills, and allows them to gain a more rounded understanding of a subject. Some universities have shifted to interdisciplinary learning and emphasized the importance by requiring degrees, programs, curriculum, or assignments that integrate two or more departments on campus. This interdisciplinary method of teaching allows students to apply their understanding in different dimensions and allows students to gain a deeper level of understanding (Lim et al. 2012). Other institutions have utilized project-based learning to enhance students understanding of real-world problems. Project-based learning allows students to be active learners and requires a higher level of engagement with the material (Kleinberg 2008; Salemi 2002; Beaudin et al 2017).

While the benefits of interdisciplinary learning and project-based teaching may be attractive to educators, the learning curve is steep, it requires creative implementation and the ability to identify areas on campus that can work together. Business education has previously achieved little progress in incorporating interdisciplinary teaching due to the efforts required to change the curriculum and reform the culture of education in Business Colleges (Bajada and Trayler 2013; Fish 2013).

In this paper we introduce *Econ Beats*, an interdisciplinary project that merges economics, music, media, and communication. This semester-long project can be incorporated within class assignments. Educators interested in interdisciplinary teaching or project-based assignments can introduce it in their

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classes at a relatively lower cost than more comprehensive curriculum change. We provide a blueprint on how we incorporated the assignment, how we assess it, why we believe the assignment is beneficial, and some recommendation and challenges based on our experience. We provide insight based on two years of experience and interaction with students enrolled in 9 sections of 2 classes. Over the two years roughly 300 students were involved with the project. We expect that at most universities, media, communication, music and economics rarely interact, and the Econ Beats assignment will allow for faculty and students to benefit from a more comprehensive and engaging approach to learning.

Why Incorporate Econ Beats?

Econ Beats is a great opportunity to introduce interdisciplinary teaching, project-based assignments, and to reinforce the importance of working in groups. At most institutions, Principles of Economics courses are either at the freshman or sophomore level, and often fulfill general education requirements. While many students are enrolled in economics courses across the nation, few go on to graduate with a major in economics (Allgood, Walstad and Siegfried 2015). Therefore, it is important that the students that are exposed to economics are able to retain the most important concepts and be able to communicate the ideas effectively. Studies have suggested that using the Arts and Humanities can help increase student retention, and student understanding of economics (Cotti and Johnson 2012; Hartley 2001; Wattsee 2002) Al-Bahrani et al. (2016) provide a list of low cost Art assignments to incorporate in the economics classroom. Relative to Al-Bahrani et al. (2016) Econ Beats is a more involved project. It requires a higher level of coordination and it meets the semester long, interdisciplinary, and project based requirements for an effective classroom assignment.

Econ Beats is a semester-long project that requires students to incorporate information as they learn it. Valcarcel (2013) and Beaudin et al. (2016), suggest that a semester long project is better at preparing students for jobs relative to small projects spread out over the semester. Furthermore, Econ Beats leverages the power of competition. It is suggested that competition helps increase students' job preparedness (Aguilar and Soques 2015; Gulley and Jackson 2015; Singh and Russo 2013; Beaudin et al. 2016). We believe the structure of the assignment can help increase interest in economics and its application.

While the structure of Econ Beats may increase students' job preparedness, we expect that students participating in Econ Beats would experience an improvement in their performance and learning outcomes for the courses. We do not formally test for learning improvements in this paper, however researchers suggest for the current generation, the digital natives, learning is enhanced in environments where teaching is relevant, dynamic, and utilizes active learning (Gros and Lopez 2016). Experimental analysis of the efficacy of new learning strategies is difficult (Cottie and Jonshon 2012). Often the first stage of innovation is to incorporate it into teaching. Assessing how effective the teaching methods are usually follows after its implementation. Table 1 provides a list of studies that use the Arts or Humanities to teach economics. When available, we provide the impact of the teaching method on learning outcomes. The table indicates two things. First, research introducing innovative teaching methods is descriptive and rarely includes evidence of learning outcomes. Secondly, when assessed, teaching methods using the Arts and Humanities in teaching increases students' outcomes, as measured by learning and interest.

Table 1: Summary of select papers that examine the efficacy of the use of Arts and Humanities to teach economics.

Author	Learning Tool	Data	Findings
Al-Bahrani, Dowell, Patel (2016)	Scrapbooking/video	Non-empirical	Provide several different video scrapbook assignment options that allow for instructors to integrate into the economics curriculum.
Cotti and Johnson (2012)	Historical Novels	Sample Size of 99 students	Description of how to incorporate a historical novel into a microeconomics class and provide some evaluation strategies. They find no difference in learning but difference in student interest in economics increases when exposed to literature.
Hall and Lawson (2008)	Music	Non-empirical	Describes a writing assignment designed to leverage student interest in music to improve economic understanding.
Harter (2003)	Music/Writing	Sample size of 77 students.	There is a relationship between learning style and learning outcomes. Music can help improve some students learning.
McClough and Heinfeldt (2012)	Music	Sample size 43 students.	Conduct a study to examine the effectiveness of using music to convey economic concepts. The empirical results suggest using music lyrics improve student understanding

Table 1: Continued

Raehsler (2013)	Music	Sample size of 600 students	Incorporating music projects has a positive influence on attendance, evaluation, and when students creating their own lyrics grades improve.
Van Horn and Van Horn (2013)	Music	Non-empirical	Article focuses on how to use music as a pedagogical device to teach History of Economic Thought.
Watts and Christopher (2012)	Art, Paintings and Drawings	Non-empirical	Provides a discussion of how to incorporate art into economics teaching.

We hypothesis that students would benefit from Econ Beats. We expect it to increase student learning because it 1) is interdisciplinary 2) is a semester long project 3) relies on group work 4) leverages music 5) leverages competition. 6) requires students to be active participants in the learning process.

The Assignment

Econ Beats was assigned at Northern Kentucky University during the academic years 2015-2017. The assignment is an extension of a project introduced by Holder et al. (2015). The original assignment requires students to remake a song and rewrite the lyrics by incorporating economic concepts. Through Econ Beats we extend the project by matching economics students with students from Media and Broadcasting (EMB) class.² The EMB students are required to develop a vision, shoot the video, and record the audio. For EMB students the learning objective is to learn how to work with a real world client. They are exposed to project management, working with clients that are not exposed to technical aspect of media and production, and team management aspects.

There are several learning objectives for the economics students. First, it is expected that they learn and understand economic terminology. Second, they will learn how to communicate economic concepts to the general public. They will learn how to work with groups and, finally, how to use technology. The assignment is designed to help students develop their communication and presentation skills. Traditionally, these learning objectives are met through requiring students to prepare presentation. We believe that Econ Beats provides an alternative approach for instructors that are looking to extend their assignments beyond traditional methods.

The assignment was administered at the principle level courses in economics. The EMB students were enrolled in Single Camera Production, a class that focuses on creating audio and video content. The assignment requires a high level of coordination within classes and across subjects. Students are provided with a rubric, and a list of assignments to help them arrive to the end project. The culmination of the project is celebrated with a public screening of all submissions. Great effort was devoted to ensure that the projects have the same weight in both classes. The project accounts for 20% of the overall grade in both, economics and EMB.

The number of projects vary by semester. In Fall 2015 there were 8 completed projects, 7 in the Spring of 2016, and 8 in the Fall of 2016. Groups consist of 7-8 economics students, and are matched with 4 students from EMB. At Northern Kentucky University, Principle of Economics courses sizes are between

² Economics instructors can collaborate with other departments. Music, Theater, English, and Communications Department can serve as possible partners.

50-55 students, while EMB classes are restricted to 20-25 students. The group sizes are larger than optimal, but we are constrained by the number of EMB students.

Students are provided with the rubric (see appendix), and examples of previous assignments on the first day of class. They are given 14 weeks and a timeline to complete the assignment and can use any content discussed in class, book, or supplemental reading. The lyrics have to be sufficiently remade and include a “heavy dose of economics”. Economics students must carefully communicate their content so that the EMB students can create a video based on the lyrics and concepts. This part of the project is the most important as economics students must learn how to take difficult concepts and teach it to students that have never been formally exposed to economics previously. This process helps reinforce the concepts for economics students. For EMB students, this is usually their only exposure to economics during their undergraduate career.

The literature on economic education has highlighted the importance of active learning in increasing student retention of the subject (Hoyt 2003). We believe Econ Beats has the potential to help students gain economic knowledge due to the active learning format of the project, and Econ Beats also makes economics more accessible to the general public. Given that the current generation struggles to find the relevancy of economics, Econ Beats can increase awareness and attract new students to the principles classes. While learning outcomes are expected to increase with the use of Econ Beats, we have not formally assessed the efficacy of the assignment. Future research in this area should formally examine the returns to using this assignment.

Timeline of Assignments and Challenges

Through several iterations of the project, we have found that there are some rules that help better coordinate teams within class and across courses. Our first suggestion is to randomly select group members. We randomly select students in the economics class into groups, then each group is randomly matched with a group from EMB. We have found that by allowing members to self-select the dynamic of the group suffers. When self-selecting, students will often create groups with their friends. However, rarely will a group be comprised of friends only. Students that can not find a group are added to already established groups. This creates a situation where the added student never fully integrates. Instructors often avoid group projects due to the complexity of assigning groups (Behesthtian-Ardekani and Mahmood 1986). Although studies have shown that there are more effective ways to assign groups (Muller 1989), we find random selection to be efficient for this project.

Since groups are randomly selected, we advise that the instructor facilitates the introduction. To encourage economics students to meet, we task each group with selecting their favorite Econ Beats video from previous semesters. Each group is required to submit a one-page summary that details which group members were in attendance, which video they picked, and why they chose the videos. The structure of this assignment requires them to meet, it also exposes them to previous submission which serve as a benchmark, and requires them to identify a person to submit the assignment on behalf of the group. The following week we facilitate and organize the EMB and economics group meeting. We recommend making the introduction between the EMB and economics groups as early as possible. In our timeline, we have devoted the third week of classes as the week which economics and EMB students meet.

At the seventh week of the semester we require students to submit the instrumental audio of the song that they have selected. This serves as a commitment strategy and a reminder that they are expected to be working on the project. Smaller low-stake task help keep the project at the forefront of students’ busy schedule. Through our experience we have learned that if students are left to their own planning they will procrastinate. Waiting to complete the Econ Beats project in a short time reduces the quality of the project. Econ Beats is too complex and requires students to collaborate to successfully complete the project. Our objective is to teach students how to meet deadlines and how to manage projects.

Groups are required to submit their lyrics by the ninth week of classes. Students are encouraged to seek help to ensure that economic terms are used correctly and that they have enough economic content to receive credit for the assignment. The audio file with the vocals is due shortly after. This helps the instructor provide feedback on the quality of the audio and whether the students need to rerecord it. This responsibility can be assigned to the EMB professor, Economics Professor, or in our case, both instructors review the audio quality.

The final project is due on the 13th weeks of the semester. Both instructors review the submissions and select which videos will be presented at the screening. We have experimented with restricting the

number of videos that are part of the final event. We have found that, if time isn't a constraint, including all submissions makes the event a better experience as measured by attendance and participation. The screening event is scheduled during the final (14th) week of classes.

In the appendix we provide instructors with a rubric and example of an assignment timeline. Instructors looking to implement the Econ Beats project can adjust the due dates or create more low-stake assignments to help their students reach the final projects. Other modifications can also be made. For institutions without an EMB department, Economic instructors can collaborate with Theater, English, Music, or Communication departments. While our collaboration with EMB helps increase the production quality, we postulate that there are gains that can be experienced by working with other departments. If no other collaboration opportunities exist it is possible for economics students to create their own videos. In earlier versions of the assignment we attempted the project with economics students only. Students were able to complete the assignment, however, the production quality was much lower.³

The Screening Event

The highlight and what differentiates Econ Beats from other music and arts projects in economics is the end of semester public screening. It is important to celebrate the students work. This aspect makes the assignment more engaging, and attracts other students to economics. The event is open to the public, we have hosted students from NKU, faculty members, high school students from the surrounding area, and other members of the community. The Econ Beats event is a fun and enjoyable experience for students, their friends, and families. We were able to award the top 3 projects with cash prizes.⁴ The top 3 videos are selected by popular vote based on the audience. Audience selection allows everyone to participate and engage in reviewing economic ideas. The order of the prizes is determined by a faculty member from economics, an EMB faculty, and a former winner of Econ Beats. Cash prizes totaled \$1,000 per semester. However, in other versions of this contest, we were able to host a successful Econ Beats event with less than \$100 in awards.

Examples of Student Projects

To best appreciate the production, and economic content of Econ Beats assignments is to view some examples. We provide three examples of the level Economic and students production quality that students produce.

The first video is called [Unemployment Journey](#). It provides viewers with two remakes of popular songs by the group Journey. The video discusses the different type of unemployment in the economy and issues with measuring unemployment. Economic instructors looking to introduce or review the unemployment chapter can use this student produced video to reinforce the topic of unemployment.

The video [Econ Bling](#) can be used when discussing the loanable funds market. The remake of Drake's *Hotline Bling* was popular with students during the spring 2016 semester. While the amount of economic content isn't as abundant as in *Unemployment Journey*, instructors can use *Econ Bling* for active learning activities as suggested in (Lawson, Hall, and Mateer 2008).

The song [Agents of Unemployment](#) is a remake of Justin Bieber's *Love Yourself*. This video also discusses unemployment types and unemployment measurement. Students approach the discussion of unemployment in a different context than in *Unemployment Journey*. The varied ways in which students' express common economic concepts is what makes Econ Beats an interesting assignment. The examples provided show how Econ Beats allows the students to creatively express their understanding of complex concepts.

Conclusion

We provide instructors with an example of how to incorporate a semester-long, interdisciplinary, project based learning assignment. Business instructors have shied away from adjusting their curriculum, although studies have found that students need to be better prepared for today's job market. We believe that

³ For economics only assignments, instructors can assign poetry, or limericks. For other examples of how to use the Arts in Economics courses see Al-Bahrani, Abdullah. A., Kim Holder, Darshak Patel, & Jadrian Wooten (2016). Art of Econ: Incorporating the Arts through Active Learning Assignments in Principles Courses. *Journal of Economics and Finance Education*. 15(2),1-17

⁴ Sponsorship was provided by Centsai.com

Econ Beats is an assignment that prepares students for real-life work environment and helps students learn and retain economics better. The Econ Beats assignment helps students learn how to manage a long term project, work in groups, think creatively, and communicate effectively, while exposing students to economic concepts. The entertainment factor of the end of semester screening also helps engage the university community, raising awareness of economics and economic concepts. Future research in this area should evaluate the efficacy of Econ Beats type assignments in increasing student learning.

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Appendix
Econ Beats



Description, Timeline, and Rubric

Any popular song may be chosen, but your song choice is subject to my approval. Song lyrics must be substantially rewritten (i.e. your own original work). No unaccompanied versions are accepted. The vocalist must be singing to recorded music and you must be able to hear the music on your video. The vocalist does not have to be a class member. When you post to YouTube, your lyrics MUST be clearly visible and readable. The lyrics must be part of your original file and not just utilizing the captions function of YouTube. Your video MUST include the following tags: “NKUEcon”, “Fall 2016”, and “Econ Beats”. You will submit your assignment in two ways

- A) Upload your video on YouTube and submit your link on Blackboard via the assignment folder.
- B) Submit the original digital file for my records.
- C) See below rubric for more information

Below is the grading scale and some samples of past submissions so you know what I am looking for in your project. Think outside the box and remember that Economics is more than just about making money! Think about all the topics we have covered in class and relate them to the world around you (If “making money” is the central theme of your video, you will only receive 1 point for creativity). Don’t forget to have fun and let the best team win! Good Luck!

1. You will receive 20 total points for the six assignments leading up to the video submission. The Econ Beats video will be the seventh assignment and worth 80 points.

1 st Assignment- Econ Beats Survey and group assignments (2 points)	Due: Sept 2nd
2 nd Assignment- First group meeting (2 points) You will receive all 2 points if you submit the name of your group members by the due date. As a group you must watch last year’s videos and pick your favorite video. Include that in your summary.	Due: Sept 9th
3 rd Assignment- Meeting with your EMB group (6 points) Your assignment is to submit minutes from your meeting. Indicating the name of the members that attended, location and date of meeting, and a paragraph summary of your discussion. One submission per group.	Due: Sept 23rd
4 th Assignment- Song Selection (2 points). Provide the name of the song, and a YouTube link to the song.	Due Nov 4th
5 th Assignment- Lyrics and Audio Due (2 points) You will be graded on the quality of the audio, originality of the lyrics, and the economic content of the lyrics. You are responsible for verifying that the lyrics you are using are acceptable and accurate. Feel free to stop by my office hours and see me if you have any questions	Due: Nov 11th
6 th Assignment- Group evaluation form (6 points)	Due: Dec 2nd
7 th Assignment- The Econ Beats video (80 points) See below rubric.	Due: Dec 2nd

2. All Submissions must include the following or the score will be an automatic ZERO:

A short description explaining what the video is about (2-3 Sentences)	Yes	No
Video embedded subtitles	Yes	No
Names of group Mmembers	Yes	No
Digital copy on USB for submission	Yes	No
Link to the uploaded YouTube video.	Yes	No

3. Your Econ Beats project will be graded on a 80 point scale according to the following table: Here is a playlist from last semesters top 6 videos www.abdullahalbahrani.com/econbeats/

	Unacceptable	Barely Acceptable	Average	Meets Expectations	Goes beyond expectations	Samples of past submissions
Audio Quality						https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUz33TnP Ys0&list=PLM dNY3- IwUXWQli0O ngYh9GoWD5 KIQWRT
Video Quality						https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUz33TnP Ys0&list=PLM dNY3- IwUXWQli0O ngYh9GoWD5 KIQWRT
Description/Caption	Description of concept is generally inaccurate (contains a few major errors or omissions)	Description of concept is somewhat accurate (contains a major error or omission), or -Description is simply a textbook definition	Accurately describes the concept(s) with only minor errors or omissions	Accurately describes concept	Accurately describes concept	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x- h13F2x5eY&index=6&list=PLF0e7TY5mjDE YIU5Mgs55fJ Rdwk8wcgOs
Economic Concepts/lyrics	Describes concept(s) in own words with some accuracy -Concept(s) are not tied together in any way	Accurately describes concept(s) in own words -Concept(s) are not tied together in any way	Accurately describes concept(s) in own words -Concepts are tied together, but only occasionally and in a superficial way	Accurately describes concept(s) in own words -Concepts are often tied together, but sometimes inaccurately,	Connects concepts together in a cohesive theme for the entire song. -Connections are mostly accurate	https://youtu.be/SoQBUb3kaCU
Creativity						https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yi3j2lwq H8&list=PL65 CE3624623304 19&index=3