

Literacy-Targeted Economics

When I began work on *Economics For Life*, I did not realize that I was taking an approach known as literacy-targeted (LT) economics. This approach is championed by, among others, Professor Michael Salemi, who for many years chaired the AEA Committee on Economic Education, as well as directing the Teacher Training Workshop Project jointly sponsored by the AEA and the National Council on Economic Education. Salemi and colleague Donna Gilleskie point out that in a typical introductory economics course,

students encounter a large number of concepts, many of which will be useful only to students who take additional courses in economics. **Generally, students who stop after principles waste course and study time attempting to master tools and language that they will rarely, if ever, use.** In a literacy-targeted (LT) course, students study a “short list” of concepts that they can use for the rest of their lives. They pursue higher-level mastery of fewer topics.¹

The topics in *Economics for Life* closely match their short-list of topics.²

A legitimate concern with the literacy-targeted approach is whether it disadvantages students who want to continue studying economics in upper level courses. Many students in introductory economics don't yet know if they want to pursue an economics credential. **As teachers, we don't want to cut off options, or disadvantage any students.**

Gilleskie and Salemi compared the performance in upper level economics courses at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill of students who took a traditional, tools-oriented introductory course for majors with students who took a literacy-targeted course. Over three years, they found that

students who complete an LT principles course earn grades as high in intermediate microeconomics and intermediate macroeconomics as those of students who complete a traditional principles course.³

1 D. Gilleskie and M. Salemi, “The Cost of Economic Literacy: How Well Does a Literacy-Targeted Principles of Economics Course Prepare Students for Intermediate Theory Courses?” *Journal of Economic Education* 43 (2), May 2012, 112.

2 See W.L. Hansen, M. Salemi and J.Siegfried, “Use It or Lose It: Teaching Literacy in the Economics Principles Course,” *American Economic Review* 92 (2), May 2002, 463-472.

3 Gilleskie and Salemi, 112.

While more research is needed, how is that for a Pareto-improvement! **The 90% of students who never take another economics course will be better off using LT books like *Economics for Life*, while the 10% who pursue economics will be no worse off than if they had taken a traditional tools-oriented introductory course.** The authors attribute the result to the extra class time devoted to mastering fewer topics, coupled with active learning assignments in the literacy-targeted course.

The University of Toronto Course Model

Over the past four years, I have used *Economics for Life* in teaching ECO105Y – Principles of Economics for Non-Specialists, at the St. George campus of the University of Toronto. This course serves as a pre-requisite for the prestigious Munk School International Relations Program and the Public Policy major in the School of Public Policy and Governance. The course also attracts many science and engineering students.

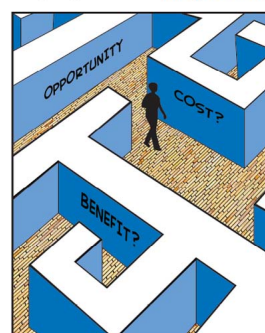
For Economics, in the U of T model, students can become majors either by taking the traditional principles course (ECO100Y – Introductory Economics) or my literacy-targeted course. Students need a 67% average in the traditional course to go on, or they can go on with an 80% average in the LT course. The grade difference makes sense because of the additional mathematical tools in the traditional course that students find challenging.

But what I like best about the model is that if a student in the LT course gets excited about economics and does well, she can continue on. At the same time, the vast majority of students in the literacy-targeted course have the benefit of a course better suited to their interests, needs, and future.

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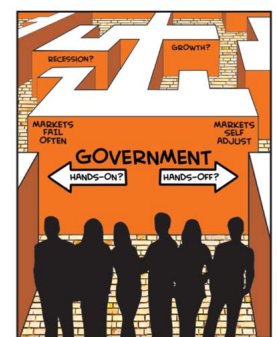
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