

Project title: Game and Media in the Economics Classroom

Course: Economics of Conflict

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Abstract

In the proposed poster presentation I will discuss some active participatory class techniques that I used in one of my classes. I will also provide examples from student papers, pictures of their projects and student reactions to the assignments and the content of the course.

Poster Proposal

The traditional approach to teaching economics usually involves solving problems, transfer of knowledge through lectures and testing students' technical and content knowledge by assigning them problems and exams. In the upper division undergraduate class on Economics of Conflict that I taught in Spring 2008, I used a combination of active, participatory and more traditional approaches. The choice of teaching techniques was driven by the class content. The course, Economics of Conflict, covered the causes, effects and solutions to armed conflicts around the world. We focused on two types of such conflicts: civil wars and terrorism. Many topics are emotionally driven and students may have pre-conceived notions. For example, many believe that civil wars are primarily driven by ethnic differences among groups and that terrorists are uneducated individuals from poor families, who have low opportunity cost of their time. Both notions are not entirely accurate (see studies by Doyle and Sambanis (2000), Fearon and Laitin (2003); Krueger and Maleckova (2003)).

In my class I motivated students to apply their understanding of economic concepts to the study of armed conflict. I wanted to engage students both academically and personally. While I still employed traditional methods of teaching and evaluation, such as lectures, weekly concept papers based on readings and exams, I wanted to show students how real and how common armed conflicts are and that such conflicts bring very real chaos and suffering. Further, although it is difficult to understand at first, during a conflict, various actions such as combatants, civilians, governments behave rationally taking into consideration the circumstances they are in and the changing definitions of risk and value of time.

In the poster presentation I will discuss the approaches used in this class and provide examples from students' work and comments about the class.

In addition to more traditional teaching and testing techniques such as lectures and exams, I incorporated active learning approaches to help students to try on different roles and to understand strategic choices of various conflict participants such as civilians, combatants, governments, international community and understand how complex such choices are. In particular, it is often challenging to understand the rationality of terrorist and insurgent groups.

First, I developed a role-playing game inspired by paper by Lichbach (1994), "What Makes Rational Peasants Revolutionary?: Dilemma, Paradox, and Irony in Peasant Collective Action". In the game, students were randomly assigned different roles and preferences towards provision

of public and private goods. I provide the description of the game and two of the roles in Appendix A.

Second, students who were assigned to work in groups were required to develop a board game based on a recent civil war. The board game had to have educational aspects and bring together factual information about a conflict itself to the class material. By designing the rules of the game students learn about the multitude of economic and social problems associated with a civil war. The student group board game projects were later presented in the class and evaluated by myself and two other faculty members. The board game project also taught students important lessons about coordinating their work with other students and making a progress on their own. The poster will include detailed guidelines for the design of the game and pictures of students' work.

Third, each student was assigned a movie that was based on a recent civil war in a developing country. Students had to write a paper that related the movie content to material we covered in the class (e.g. peace building, determinants of conflict, opportunities that conflict creates and the role of international organizations in civil wars). This last assignment was meant to bring together emotional aspects and complexity of a conflict with the dry world of econometric models, robustness tests, tables and figures. Complex concepts can be easier understood through real-life examples such as films, and the examples can be then further re-enforced through in-class discussion (Bhadra 2006). Students can retain information better and acquire ownership of the class material that is embedded in the movies (Bhadra 2006).

References:

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Appendix A:

An excerpt from the role-playing game as presented to a student (the specific role is randomly assigned. There are four roles.):

Dilemma:

The story below is partially based on the Rebecca riots (1839-1844) in South Wales and Mid Wales.

Recently you have been approached by a certain party who knows well about the problems of peasants in your area and suggested helping you in some way. However, you have to contribute your effort and time to this party. What will induce you to join? Identify strategies that you may pursue to address your grievances.

Role 1:

You are a poor peasant in a village. You and your family rent land for agriculture and sell crops at the markets located in near-by cities. You have to travel to those markets to sell your crops and livestock and buy goods for consumption via local and main roads at least once a month.

Role 2:

You are a relatively well-off peasant in a village. You and your family rent land for agriculture and sell crops at the markets located in near-by cities. You have to travel to those markets to sell your crops and livestock and buy consumption goods via local and main roads several times a year. The closest free school is located 10 miles away. Access to school is very important to you as your family has six children. However, you can afford to pay for their education in a private school which is only three miles away.

Problems of all villagers:

Lately, you [game participant], your family and your village folk have been suffering a lot.

- a) The taxes imposed by the king have increased.
- b) Landowners are re-writing your share-cropping contracts, asking for $\frac{1}{3}$ of the crop as compared to $\frac{1}{4}$ that you paid earlier.
- c) Also, each peasant household who wants to rent land from the landowner has to contribute 10 hours of work per week (per households) either on the landowner's plot or provide services at the manor.
- d) Further, the many toll-gates on the main roads are operated by trusts which are supposed to maintain and even improve the roads, funding this from tolls. Many trusts however charge extortionate tolls and divert the money raised to other uses. Even where this is not the case, the toll-gate laws imposed an additional financial burden on poor farming communities.