Effects of Integration and Classroom Experiments on Student Learning and Satisfaction

Dirk Yandell
Professor of Economics
University of San Diego
5998 Alcala Park
San Diego, CA 92110-2492

yandell@acusd.edu
(619) 260-4835
(619) 260-4891 fax

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Introduction

This paper examines the impact of an integrated micro- and macro-economics principles course, taught with a strong emphasis on classroom experiments, on student performance and satisfaction. During the Fall 1998 semester an experimental integrated micro- and macro-economics course was developed and taught at the University of San Diego. Students completing the course received six semester units of credit (3 units for Principles of Microeconomics and 3 units for Principles of Macroeconomics) and received separate grades for the two courses. The class met for 6 hours per week. Microeconomics was completed during the first half of the fourteen-week semester and macroeconomics was covered during the second half. The course included a number of classroom experiments. Economic experiments conducted during the semester, primarily in the microeconomics portion of the class, included a double oral auction, an ultimatum game, a public goods experiment, a production function experiment, a prisoner's dilemma game, and an experiment in international trade and comparative advantage.

Classroom experiments have grown in popularity and are claimed to improve student interest and learning [see Brock, 1991 and Neral and Ray, 1995, for example]. The Journal of Economic Education has devoted an entire issue to classroom experiments [JEE, Fall 1993]. Several resource books exist to assist instructors who wish to integrate economic experiments into the classroom as a pedagogy tool [Yandell, 1999; Hazlett, 1998; Bergstrom & Miller, 1997; Delemeester & Neral, 1995]. Experiments can be time consuming, however, so there is concern that less material will covered in classes with a heavy experimental focus. The 6-unit integrated course was designed to allow more time for experiments without sacrificing the number of chapters covered by eliminating any overlap or review required when micro and macro courses are taught separately. The expected result was improved student learning without loss of content coverage. To test this hypothesis, student grades and student evaluations are used to analyze performance and satisfaction for the Microeconomics portion of the integrated class, relative to traditional microeconomics courses taught by the same instructor. Student characteristics are included in the regression model to account for differences in performance due to ability or other factors.

Background and Data

The University of San Diego (USD) requires all entering freshmen to enroll in a *preceptorial* course in their first semester. Preceptorial courses are specially designated general education courses open only to entering freshmen. The preceptorial program was developed as a vehicle for academic advising. The professor teaches the course but also serves as the student's advisor for the first year, and often for an additional semester or two until the student declares a major. The classes are generally kept small, with enrollment limited to about eighteen students per

course. Incoming students are given brief course descriptions and are asked to submit their preferences before registration. The Dean's office tries to accommodate these preferences when initial schedules are developed.

The integrated Fall 1998 six-unit course was offered as a preceptorial, with two sections available. Each section met separately for 85 minutes on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, and both sections met in a combined three hour class on Wednesday afternoons. Most of the classroom experiments in the integrated course were run in the separate smaller classes during the morning sessions. The two classes had enrollments of 16 and 19, for a total 1998 enrollment of thirty-five students.

This paper compares test scores and course evaluations from the microeconomics portion of the integrated 1998 course to the scores and evaluations of students from a pair of Fall 1997 preceptorials. The 1997 courses were traditional 3-semester-unit micro-only principles sections. The only experiments conducted in the 1997 class were a double oral auction and a production function experiment. Total 1997 enrollment was 31, with sections of 19 and 12 students. The 1997 and 1998 populations have very similar profiles. Economics is taught within the School of Business Administration at USD, and approximately 88% of the students in each group reported that they intended to major within the School of Business Administration. The course therefore served as a prerequisite for the major as in addition to fulfilling a general education requirement. Every student in each population was a first-semester freshman and had been registered in the course because of a listed preference for this preceptorial during summer advising.

The microeconomics portion of the 1998 integrated course was structured with the same basic format as the traditional 1997 course. Course requirements were identical, with a grade determined by performance on five quizzes, a midterm exam, a final exam, and regularly collected homework assignments. The textbook used for the course was Case & Fair's *Principles of Economics.* The fourth edition was used in 1997 and the fifth edition was adopted in 1998, but there were only minor changes between editions in the microeconomics portion of the text. I maintained the same chapter sequence and content coverage in my syllabus. The same final exam was used and the same course evaluations were administered each year.

Student Performance

It was hypothesized that the economic experiments in the integrated course added to student learning and satisfaction. The combination of microeconomics and macroeconomics in the same semester eliminated the need to revisit the introductory foundation chapters and therefore allowed time for the experiments to be conducted without loss of content coverage. Performance on the microeconomics final exam was used as a measure of student learning. The same final exam was given in the traditional microeconomics classes in 1997 and in the integrated 1998 course. The final exam score is expected to be higher in 1998, net of the effects of other relevant variables. For each student, data was gathered on the following variables:

FINALEXAM	the score (out of 100 possible points) on the microeconomics final exam
SAT-V	the students' Scholastic Aptitude Test verbal score
SAT-M	the students' SAT mathematics score
HSGPA	the students' high school grade point average as calculated by the USD admissions office
FEMALE	a dummy variable for gender (= 1 if FEMALE; = 0 if male)
EXPERIMENT	a dummy variable to distinguish students in the 1998 experimental course from students in the 1997 traditional course (= 1 if enrolled in the 1998 course; = 0 for 1997)

The HSGPA variable represents the high school GPA as calculated by USD's admissions office. Academic grades were converted using a 4-point scale, but greater weight was given to honors or advanced placement courses. It counts only academic subjects (physical education and drivers education grades are removed, for example). The total sample size was 66 students, with 31 observations from 1997 and 35 from 1998. Table 1 summarizes the data.

Table 1: Summary statistics

Variable	1997 n = 31		1998 n = 35		Combined n = 66	
	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Median (Range)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Median (Range)	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Median (Range)
Final Exam	70.35 (13.10)	69 (51)	78.00 (11.79)	78 (50)	74.41 (12.91)	76 (57)
SAT - v	526.5 (76.2)	540 (330)	563.1 (71.3)	570 (290)	545.9 (75.37)	550 (380)
SAT - m	559.7 (66.5)	550 (280)	591.1 (69.7)	590 (280)	576.4 (69.54)	570 (340)
HSGPA	3.304 (0.397)	3.20 (1.32)	3.563 (0.522)	3.49 (2.25)	3.441 (0.482)	3.39 (2.25)
FEMALE	0.452		0.514		0.485	

Students in 1997 received a mean score of 70.35 (out of 100) on the final exam, while 1998 students averaged 78.0. Students in 1998, however, had stronger academic qualifications than in 1997, averaging 20 points more on the verbal portion of the SAT and earning 30 points more on the SAT mathematics score. The mean high school GPA for the 1998 students was 3.563, compared to 3.304 for the 1997 group.

To evaluate final exam performance net of the effects of academic qualifications the following regression model was estimated:

$$\text{FINALEXAM} = B_0 + B_1\ \text{SAT-V} + B_2\ \text{SAT-M} + B_3\ \text{HSGPA} + B_4\ \text{FEMALE} + B_5\ \text{EXPERIMENT}$$

The regression results are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Regression Results for Student Performance

(Dependent Variable = score on microeconomics final exam)

Variable	Coefficient	T-Statistic	p-value
Constant	18.120	1.29	0.201
SAT-V	0.01034	0.50	0.619
SAT-M	0.00311	0.13	0.897
HSGPA	14.235	3.86	0.000
FEMALE	-4.394	-1.40	0.167
EXPERIMENT	3.761	1.30	0.197

R^2 (adj) = .269

F= 5.79

S = 11.04

n = 66

Consistent with *a priori* expectations, both of the SAT variables and HSGPA are positively associated with the final exam score, although neither of the SAT variables are significant factors. Females, after accounting for academic qualifications, did worse on the exam, but the result is not significant at the .05 level. A student's high school GPA is the only statistically significant factor in explaining variation in the final exam score, with an approximate 14 point improvement on the exam associated with a 1-point increase in GPA. The coefficient for the EXPERIMENT variable is 3.761, suggesting that the integrated approach and focus on EXPERIMENTAL economics increased student final exam scores by nearly 4 points, all else held constant. Although this positive coefficient is encouraging, it is not significant at the .05 level.

High correlation between the SAT variables and HSGPA was suspected, but the correlation matrix (shown in Table 3) shows that multicollinearity is not a problem. Alternate models were estimated without the SAT variables a with a single combined SAT score, but the remaining coefficients did not change appreciably in magnitude or significance. Estimating the model in log and semi-log forms did not change the results.

Table 3: Correlation between independent variables				
	SAT-V	SAT-M		HSGPA
SAT-M	0.446			
HSGPA	0.262		0.421	
FEMALE	-0.028	0.003		0.450

Although the coefficient for EXPERIMENT is not statistically different from zero in the pooled data, a Chow test can be used with the separated 1997 and 1998 data to test for a difference in the slope coefficients between the two samples. The Chow test F-statistic is 0.67, which is not greater than the critical value $F_{.05,5,60} = 2.37$, so the null hypothesis that the slope coefficients are the same in the two samples cannot be rejected.

Student Satisfaction

To test student satisfaction, student evaluation responses were evaluated. The same University of Washington assessment form was used each semester. The first twenty-two questions refer to the course and the instructor's performance, and the remaining five questions reflect the student's efforts in the course. A two-sample t-test was performed with the raw evaluation responses from 1997 and 1998 for each question and for groups of questions to test for significant differences. For the first 22 questions, students rated the course and the instructor's contribution to the course with a response in one of six categories (Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, Poor, Very Poor) which are quantified using a 5 - 0 numeric scale. The last five questions offered seven options (ranging from Much Higher to Much Lower), which are coded from 7 to 1. Table 4 provides a summary of the mean responses to each question for the two years.

Overall, the student evaluations significantly improved in 1998. Both the combined items 1-22 and items 1-27 showed an improvement that was significant at the 1% level. For individual questions within the first 22 items, three showed a significant improvement and none were significantly worse. The three significant improvements were for question 4, "The instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject" (p-value = 0.096); question 10, "Instructor's enhancement of student interest in material" (p-value = 0.0013); and question 14, "Interest level of class session" (p-value = 0.046). These suggest that the experimental focus did improve student interest in the material and teaching effectiveness.

Table 4: Student Course Evaluation Summary

	1997 Count	1997 Mean	1998 Count	1998 Mean	Improvement (1998-1997)	p-value (Ho: 98=97)	* = signif. at 10% ** = signif. at 5% *** = signif. at 1%
1. The course as a whole was:	27	4.000	33	4.182	0.182	0.35	
2. The course content was:	27	3.926	33	3.848	-0.077	0.68	
3. The instructor's contribution to the course was:	27	4.519	32	4.719	0.2	0.25	
4. The instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject was:	27	4.185	33	4.545	0.36	0.096	*
COMBINED ITEMS 1-4:	108	4.157	131	4.321	0.163	0.11	
5. Course organization was:	27	4.481	33	4.303	-0.178	0.27	
6. Sequential presentation of concept was:	27	4.037	33	4.152	0.114	0.58	
7. Explanations by instructor were:	27	4.185	33	4.303	0.118	0.59	
8. Instructor's ability to present alternatives was:	27	4.259	33	3.939	-0.32	0.16	
9. Instructor's use of examples and illustrations was:	27	4.407	33	4.667	0.259	0.19	
10. Instructor's enhancement of student interest in material was:	27	3.333	33	4.182	0.848	0.0013	***
11. Student confidence in instructors knowledge was:	27	4.667	33	4.697	0.03	0.83	
12. Instructor's enthusiasm was:	26	3.692	33	4.091	0.399	0.15	
13. Clarity of course objective was:	27	3.926	33	4.242	0.316	0.29	
14. Interest level of class session was:	27	3.148	33	3.636	0.488	0.046	**
15. Availability of extra help when needed was:	26	4.192	33	4.333	0.141	0.52	
16. Use of class time was:	27	4.481	33	4.212	-0.269	0.13	
17. Instructor's interest in whether students learned was:	27	3.963	33	4.212	0.249	0.35	
18. Amount you learned in this course was:	27	3.963	33	4.242	0.279	0.17	
19. Relevance and usefulness of course content were:	27	3.926	33	4.152	0.226	0.34	
20. Evaluative and grading techniques (tests, papers, etc.) were:	26	4.000	33	3.788	-0.212	0.39	
21. Reasonableness of assigned work was:	26	4.038	33	4.212	0.174	0.43	
22. Clarity of student responsibilities and requirements was:	27	4.259	33	4.273	0.013	0.94	
COMBINED ITEMS 5-22:	482	4.054	594	4.199	0.145	0.0076	***
COMBINED ITEMS 1-22:	590	4.073	725	4.221	0.148	0.0021	***
Relative to other college courses you have taken:							
23. Do you expect your grade in this course to be:	27	4.778	33	4.848	0.071	0.81	
24. The intellectual challenge presented was:	27	5.556	33	5.455	-0.101	0.62	
25. The amount of effort you put in this course was:	27	5.074	33	5.758	0.684	0.02	**
26. The amount of effort to succeed in this course was:	27	5.519	33	5.576	0.057	0.83	
27. Your involvement in course was:	27	5.519	33	5.818	0.3	0.34	
COMBINED ITEMS 23-27:	135	5.29	165	5.49	0.2	0.11	
COMBINED ITEMS 1-27:	725	4.301	890	4.456	0.155	0.0024	***

It is interesting to note that lower scores were received in 1998 on questions 5, 8, and 16: "Course organization," "Instructor's ability to present alternatives," and "Use of class time." Although the reductions were not significant, these three questions may reflect the opportunity costs of using classroom experiments. The student perception that the course is less organized may be due to the unpredictable nature of classroom experiments, since actual experimental outcomes are uncertain. Experiments also take time to explain, administer, and debrief, so students may see class time being used less intensively than in a lecture-dominated course. More time with experiments also means less time to develop alternatives or present additional examples.

In addition to the questions summarized in Table 4, students also have the opportunity to provide handwritten comments on a separate page. Students are prompted on the comment sheet with the following questions:

1. Do you find this class to be intellectually challenging?
2. What aspects of this class contributed most to your learning?
3. What aspects of this class detracted from your learning?
4. What suggestions do you have for improving this course?

There were 27 comment sheets returned in 1997 and 33 in 1998. Each was examined for evidence that the classroom experiments contributed to student interest or satisfaction. Frequent comments under question 2 were that the class activities, examples, and experiments were interesting and useful. Seven (26%) of 1997 forms contained such comments, compared to 23 (70%) of the 1998 forms. These proportions are statistically different at the 1% level (p-value = 0.000).

After question 4, seven 1997 students (26%) suggested that more interactive learning, student involvement, and experiments would have improved the course. Interestingly, six 1998 students (18%) made the same comment, even though the experimental focus was much more pronounced in 1998. No student in either year said that the class activities or experiments detracted from learning or that fewer experiments should be done.

Conclusion

This study has examined the impact of classroom experiments on student learning and satisfaction. Student evaluations show that the experiments were memorable, and thus potentially contributed positively to the students' learning experience. This study also supports the claim that classroom experiments improve overall student satisfaction and interest. The impact on student performance is less dramatic. Independent of other factors, students in the experimental course scored almost four points higher on the final exam, but the regression coefficient was not statistically significant at the 10% level. The key factor explaining performance on the final exam was found to be the students' high school GPA.

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