Online Teaching Tips—Encouraging Critical Thinking and Information Literacy in an Online Class

Many students find economics to be an interesting, but quite challenging course. For online students that do not have the benefit of in-class lectures and discussions, that challenge can be even greater.

As an instructor, I feel it's important to encourage all of my students to engage in critical thinking and to become more information literate. This applies to my online students as well. As part of my online courses, I include critical thinking research assignments, problem sets with critical thinking discussion questions, and an information literacy assignment which incorporates the COD Library’s Information Literacy Module.

**Critical Thinking:** While there is specific terminology, economic models, and formulas that every economics student must master, a much more important learning objective is that students apply the information they have learned in the classroom to real world issues and apply critical thinking skills to these issues.

**Critical thinking research assignments:** For their critical thinking research assignments, students can choose from a given list of global issues that relate to topics covered in the course, such as the global food crisis, economic development, international trade, or the European debt crisis. Once they select an issue, they must then complete a selected reading on that topic and answer specific discussion questions pertaining to the reading. Next, they must use the COD Library database article indices to find additional articles on their topic, summarize the main points of these articles, and then evaluate the articles for bias/objectivity. Finally, they must write down at least one ‘takeaway’ from the assignment. In other words, they must tell me what the most important thing was that they learned from this assignment that they did not know before. I have found that the students really enjoy these assignments and that they learn quite a bit about critical thinking in general, and also about a global issue that perhaps they did not give much thought about before.

**Critical thinking questions in problem sets:** To ensure that students have mastered the material of the course, they must submit problem sets frequently throughout the semester. These problem sets consist of short answer discussion questions related to the corresponding chapter reading in the textbook, as well as numerical and graphing questions where they must apply concepts and theories they have learned. Additionally, these problem sets include a link to a short article related to a topic from the course. The student must read the article and then answer several short answer discussion questions to demonstrate their comprehension of the reading and how the reading applies to our course. Again, students really seem to enjoy these assignments as they can relate concepts learned in the course to current, real world issues.

**Information Literacy:** Each semester, I upload the Information Literacy Module created by the COD Library into our course folder in Blackboard. Students are then required to a) review each segment’s tutorial; b) complete each segment’s quiz; c) complete and submit segment worksheets; and d) complete and submit the Module Feedback survey to provide feedback about the module.

Critical thinking and information literacy are an important part of the learning experience for students in any course at COD, including online courses. I hope that I have provided you with some good ideas about ways in which to encourage online students to engage in critical thinking and become more information literate.

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