

Reflecting on Learning from Participation in a Co-curricular Reading Group

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Abstract

Co-curricular activities in universities offer faculty the opportunity to promote and enhance the personal and professional values required in particular professions, through experiential learning. They differ from extra-curricular activities in that they are tied much more closely to the formal curriculum. This study explores the experiences of students who attended a co-curricular, voluntary, non-credit Economics reading group in 2017-2018. Experiences were captured in short narratives provided by participants following graduation. These narratives suggest that participants felt they were better prepared for the study of Economics in general and for continuous assessment in Economics modules in particular, as a result of participation. There was also evidence of the importance of the reading group to early graduate career identity formation.

Keywords

Co-curricular activities, Economic literacy, graduate career identity

1. Introduction and Motivation

Co-curricular activities are activities that are closely tied to formal curricula and are typically developed by and run by academic staff. Most often, co-curricular activities are established to enhance students' personal and professional values through experiential learning (see, for example, Davis *et al* 2018; Huang 2018; Nguyen Voges *et al* 2017). They can also serve as an additional aid to students in learning formal content (see, for example, Lee & Matusovich 2016). They can take a wide variety of different forms, including residential retreats, professional conferences, laboratory visits, weekly workshops, discipline-specific learning centres, undergraduate research and so forth. They tend to be mandatory but non-credited, and they provide an opportunity for students to enhance their knowledge through a form of interaction with peers and alongside, and typically under the guidance of, lecturers, in a way that is distinct from the lecture theatre setting. They are also quite distinct from extra-curricular activities. Although extra-curricular activities may help students to develop important competencies and values, they are not typically tied to formal curriculum in the same way as co-curricular activities.

In this paper, we describe a voluntary, non-credit, co-curricular intervention that our faculty undertook in the academic year 2017/18. DCU students taking a range of economics modules in their final year were invited to participate in a reading group to discuss and interrogate research published in top economics journals. The level of active participation was much higher than in formal modules. In the latter, large class sizes hinder in-depth class discussion. The aim of the reading group was to give interested students an opportunity to engage with economics literature in a smaller group, and to improve their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It was also thought that participation might be of particular interest to students who had strong performances in their economics modules to date.

The group met once every two weeks. Approximately 15 students participated regularly over the course of the year. Demand for places exceeded supply. In this paper, we outline the motivation on our part for running this group and offer insights on students' perceived benefits. After graduation, approximately four months after the

final reading group session, participants were invited by email, by the lecturer who facilitated the reading group, to provide some commentary on their experience of the reading group and what it meant to them. It was explained to the now graduates that the information they might supplied would be used in a presentation. They were given some prompts – the usefulness of the experience, how it could be improved – to help frame the narratives they provided. Out of the 15 students who participated, 9 replied. (234 words on average). Analysis of the narratives highlighted three main themes:

- a belief that participation improved their general knowledge of economics,
- a belief that participation helped them with assessment in Economics modules,
- reflection on the link between participation and future career goals

2. Enhancing Economic Literacy

The majority of narratives indicated that respondents believed participation to have enhanced their understanding of conceptual thought, theory building and testing in Economics. For some, it is clear that participation in the group led to a fundamental change in the way they thought about economics. For example, one felt *“the most important point for me of our reading group is that it had (sic) broadened the way I think.”* Another believed that *“...through discussions I had found different ways of thinking, and more effective methods to obtain better results.”* They also felt that the group helped them to make sense of and become more discerning about econometrics. For example, one student felt that the group discussions around particular papers helped him to *“develop an awareness of the limitations of certain types of research papers, and ... spot the features associated with reliable and unreliable forms of research.”*

3. Enhancing performance in assessment

Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of respondents indicated that they joined the group believing that it would help them to achieve higher grades in their economics modules. They also indicated that they believed participation did indeed give them higher grades than they would have achieved without participation. Some believed this effect was significant: *“... without a doubt ... by taking part in this group, my grades improved immensely in my CA.”*

Narratives suggest that respondents believed that participation had given them better skills for sifting through large amounts of academic reading and being able to identify key readings: *“reading group improved the quality of papers I included in my essays, as it helped me see through the “fluff” more.”*

“...it made writing assignments and finding relevant papers much more easier (sic) because I not only knew how to take the important information out but I also was able to identify which papers had more reliable data.”

4. Helping to set early graduate career goals

Several respondents had already decided on pursuing Masters level programmes on graduation. Some respondents believed that participation gave them access to the lecturer’s advice on which Economics Masters would suit them. However, respondents also indicated that the experience was broad enough to be relevant to their future careers regardless of what disciplines they went on to study at Masters level: *“an understanding as to what to keep in mind when going further with my own studies and research.”* One respondent believed the experience of participation would give benefits beyond further study: *“the benefits of the reading group I will bring with me through my masters and into my working life.”*

5. Conclusions and Future Work

The motives participants had in joining the group are hard to assess. Some comments such as *“people were simply there to learn and improve their skills”* and *“[I joined to] indulge my own academic interests and curiosities”* suggest high intrinsic academic motivation *to know* (Fairchild *et al* 2005), that students were coming because they simply enjoyed learning. However, it is interesting to note that the participants had not scored highly in economics modules in previous years, and this, coupled with the desire to improve performance in economics evidenced across the narratives, suggests a high intrinsic motivation *to accomplish*.

The alternative learning environment appealed to the participants, with narratives identifying the friendly and supportive atmosphere as vital to enhancing their experience. This atmosphere enabled these participants to embrace higher order

thinking in a way that they had been unable to in the large lecture. The reading group afforded an opportunity for peer-to-peer collaborative learning that is absent from the teaching of Economics in final year where lectures are large and there are no tutorials. Again, this might have appealed more to students who struggled with Economics in earlier years – the reading group may have made up for the loss of tutorials and the peer-to-peer collaboration they provide.

In general, those who attained an A grade in their first and second year Economics modules did not attend. This may well be because they did not see themselves as requiring anything extra to help them reach their academic goals. However, neither did those who attained a D grade or lower. It is possible that these students felt intimidated, or were unwilling to give up their spare time to do additional academic work. This leads us to another characteristic of the participants. Most were heavily involved in *extra*-curricular activities on campus. Therefore, it is possible that these students, more so than others with similar achievements in Economics modules in first and second year, were willing to give up their time to participate, because they were aware, through their participation in extra-curricular activities, that learning takes place in a variety of different contexts, and not just in the lecture theatre. It is possible that they had a more holistic approach to learning than other groups of students in their cohort.

Participants also feel that participation helped them to understand the deeper thinking required at Masters level. The vast majority of the participants went on to Masters level study and most but not all to Masters in Economics. It gave them an opportunity to get career advice from the lecturer in a setting they were comfortable with. At a deeper level, participation seems to have played an important part of career identity formation. Participants learned how to “walk the walk” of a Masters level student, and as such, began to see themselves as capable of study at the Masters level.

This small study has opened several opportunities for further research, in co-curricular activity at third level and how it might support formal learning, how it could combine with peer-to-peer learning to develop higher order thinking, and how it may help with early graduate career development and identity.

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