

# **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MUSIC AND STUDENT ENJOYMENT OF ECONOMICS CLASS: HOW TO COMPETE WITH GRAND THEFT AUTO, CRACK AND CHLAMYDIA!**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Making economics classes enjoyable and interesting is a challenge in today's world. One way to do so is through the use of music and lyrics. A survey of students in an Introduction to Economics class suggests that the use of music increases their enjoyment of economics. However, there is little evidence that it increases their interest in, or understanding of, economics.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Instructors continually strive to make their classes interesting and enjoyable to students. Unfortunately, as Phil Jupitus said on the BBC radio show *The News Quiz*, they are “competing with Grand Theft Auto, crack, chlamydia, any number of exciting alternatives” (Lloyd, 2009).

One way to stimulate interest is through the use of music. For example, Hall and Lawson (2008) showcased the use lyrics in a writing assignment designed to improve economic reasoning and understanding. Students in an intermediate microeconomics course were given an extra credit assignment involving the full lyrics of five songs along with several questions. They reproduced some of the better student responses. Overall they conclude that, in their opinion, the assignment worked well in getting students to apply knowledge, that the assignments were fun and interesting to students, and that they generated discussions about economics outside of class. Raehsler (2009) reported the use of music in a consumer economics course. Two different assignments were used; in spring 2007, students were asked to analyze the lyrics to *Money* by Pink Floyd in a written assignment. They then had to select their own song and write a longer assignment analyzing the song and providing a band history. In fall 2008, students had to write their own song lyrics. No music assignments were given in fall 2006 or fall 2007. He found that the scores on the final examination were significantly higher for fall 2008 than for fall 2007, though there was no difference between fall 2006 and spring 2007. He also found that attendance was higher when music was included by about four to five percentage points on average. He also reported better student evaluations of the course and instructor when music was included in the course.

The focus of this paper however, is slightly different – we are interested in the students' thoughts on the pedagogy. To do so, students answered a survey independent of university course evaluations. This allowed the instructor to ask questions specific to the use of music in economics.

## METHODOLOGY

Augusta State University (ASU) is a member of the University System of Georgia (USG). It currently offers more than 50 programs of study leading to bachelor, masters and educational specialist degrees. In fall 2009, there were 7,061 students enrolled at the institution (6,421 in spring 2009). In fiscal year 2009, 608 bachelor's degrees were conferred. The freshman retention rate in 2007/2008 (the latest year data is available) was 69% within the institution and 73% within the USG. The six year baccalaureate degree graduation rate for the 2003 cohort was 21% within ASU and 28% in the USG.

Introduction to Economics is a course aimed at non-business majors. The core curriculum of all bachelor degrees at ASU requires 12 credit hours in social sciences. Students are required to take an American history and American government class and must choose one of four courses: Introduction to Economics, Cultural Anthropology, Introduction to General Psychology, or Introduction to Sociology (along with one other course). A broad range of majors are represented in a typical Introduction to Economics class including, but not limited to: engineering, nursing, sociology, history, English and education. Sixty seven percent of the students were freshmen or sophomores in spring 2009, and 73% were in the fall. The course is taught three times a year (fall, spring and summer) with one section each semester taught by the same instructor. Enrollment is normally limited to 50 students due to room limitations. However, actual enrollment was less (43 in spring and 41 in the fall). Only 10 students were enrolled in the summer, and were not surveyed for this paper. Those students were not surveyed for two reasons: first, the summer class is an accelerated 4-week course taught for 2 ½ hours per day four days a week requiring a different delivery of the course. Second, the low enrollment compared to traditional semesters suggests there may be some selection bias in who chooses to take summer classes.

The course taught in the spring of 2009 included music as part of the instruction while in the fall of 2009 the course was taught without music. Each class also used a variety of other teaching tools including a textbook, newspapers, internet, etc. In the spring a pop music video (usually from YouTube) was played in class and the accompanying lyrics were presented via a projector. Questions were then posed to stimulate discussion of the economic concepts conveyed in the lyrics. Sometimes the questions were taken from the website From ABBA to Zeppelin, Led: Using Music to Teach Economics (Lawson, Hall and Mateer, 2008). This website lists a variety of song lyrics that relate to economic concepts. The posts are searchable by economic topic, artist, song title, etc. Alternatively, they can be browsed by genre, JEL code, and key

(economic) word. Each post includes a selection from the song's lyrics, as well as links to websites that have the full lyrics and videos.

The presentation of the video in class depended on the nature of the lyrics and traditional class content. Some classes began with the video to introduce the topic, while others were used after the topic had been introduced and were used to solidify understanding or generate debate. For example, the lyrics to *Ghost Town* by The Specials (Dammers, J. 1981, track 1) were used after the introduction of supply and demand so students could apply shifts in demand and supply to nightclubs.

This town (town) is coming like a ghost town  
All the clubs have been closed down  
This place (town) is coming like a ghost town  
Bands won't play no more  
Too much fighting on the dance floor (A-la-la ...) Do you remember the good old days before the ghost town?  
We danced and sang as the music played in any boomtown

After the video had played and the lyrics had been presented, the instructor would ask what supply and demand factors had led to all the clubs closing down. Student answers include a decrease in demand from the recession compared to the "good old days" of the "boomtown." It was also suggested that the increased costs of hiring security to counter the "fighting on the dance floor" would shift supply to the left.

*Money for Nothing* by Dire Straits (Knopfler, M. & Sting, 1985, track 2) was used to introduce the concept of opportunity cost:

Look at them yo-yo's, that's the way you do it  
You play the guitar on that MTV  
That ain't workin', that's the way you do it  
Money for nothin' and your chicks for free  
Now that ain't workin', that's the way you do it  
Lemme tell ya, them guys ain't dumb  
Maybe get a blister on your little finger  
Maybe get a blister on your thumb

Here the instructor repeated Mark Knopfler's claim that rock stars get "money for nothing" and their "chicks for free" and asks if that is really true. Responses, including faculty at an online summit at Brenau University, usually correctly identify some opportunity cost of being a musician. These costs may include sexually transmitted diseases (chlamydia) and drug addiction (crack) from pursuing the rock star lifestyle!

Appendix A and B provide the survey questions for each class. In the spring of 2009 students (n=34) were asked about their enjoyment of music and lyrics in economics as well as whether that use increased their interest in the subject. They were also asked if their understanding of economics was helped by the use of music and whether the use of music should be expanded. Students were asked to answer the questions based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 =

strongly agree,..., 5 = strongly disagree). There were also two open-ended questions. In the fall, students (n=38) were asked only if they enjoyed the economics course and if it increased their interest in economics and their understanding of economic concepts.

## RESULTS

The mean, mode and median responses to these questions are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Student enjoyment was higher when music was included in the class. However, the questions may not be asking exactly the same thing. Students in the spring were asked if they enjoyed music and lyrics in economics, while students in the fall were asked if they enjoyed economics. The introductory course in economics did increase students' interest in economics, but the average responses were very similar between the spring and the fall. Similarly, students' (self reported) understanding of economics was almost identical between the course with music and the course without music. Students are not keen on expanding its use but enjoy the introduction of topics via popular music.

<b>Table 1</b> <b>MUSIC AND ECONOMICS</b> <b>Averages with music</b>			
	Mean	Mode	Median
I enjoyed the use of music and lyrics in ECON 1810	1.64	1	2
The use of music and lyrics in ECON 1810 increased my interest in economics	2.24	3	2
The use of music and lyrics in ECON 1810 helped me understand economic concepts	1.88	2	2
The use of music and lyrics in ECON 1810 should be expanded	2.39	3	3
<i>Note:</i> Likert scale (1= strongly agree,..., 5= strongly disagree)			

<b>Table 2</b> <b>MUSIC AND ECONOMICS</b> <b>Averages without music</b>			
	Mean	Mode	Median
I enjoyed ECON 1810	2.24	2	2
ECON 1810 increased my interest in economics	2.32	2	2
ECON 1810 helped me understand economic concepts	1.87	2	2
<i>Note:</i> Likert scale (1= strongly agree,..., 5= strongly disagree)			

To determine if there was any significant difference in student responses, the data was analyzed using ordered probit regression. Students' enjoyment, interest and understanding were used as dependent variables with an independent dummy variable equal to 1 if the student was in the spring class that utilized music. The results presented in Table 3 suggest that student enjoyment of the course was significantly higher with music than without. However, no such

association can be identified for student interest and understanding. This suggests that while music does increase student enjoyment, more traditional instructional techniques are still required for raising interest and understanding of economics.

<b>Table 3</b> <b>MUSIC AND ECONOMICS</b> <b>Ordered probit analysis</b>		
Dependent variable	Coefficient on music	Standard error
Enjoyed	-.671	.267
Interest	-.112	.251
Understand	.012	.261
<i>Note:</i> Likert scale (1= strongly agree,..., 5= strongly disagree)		

A question to students in the spring asked if the use of music should be expanded. Their responses (see row 5 of Table 1) suggest that one song a class is about right. Comments from students in the open-ended questions suggested that music was a good attention grabber and method to introduce economic concepts. Some students did want the use of music expanded either with assignments related to the music or greater economic analysis of the lyrics. Some drawbacks that students mentioned included some difficulty in hearing the lyrics due to some poor quality videos on YouTube. Also, perhaps reflecting the preferences of the instructor, students prefer current songs.

Although the aim of this paper is not to analyze students' understanding of economic concepts except in their own self reported way, some initial evidence from the spring 09 macroeconomics exam is relevant to the debate. Question 10 asked:

Which of the following persons would not be considered unemployed?  
 an auto worker vacationing in Florida during a layoff  
 a college student actively seeking a summer job  
 a construction worker who has given up looking for work after 18 months without a job  
 a retiree looking for part-time work to supplement his Social Security income

Sixty three percent of students responded correctly with answer (c). Question 41 of the exam asked a question based on a lyric that had not been presented in class:

"Is it worth the aggravation to find yourself a job when there's nothing worth working for?" These lyrics from Oasis suggest the singer is  
 a discouraged worker  
 cyclically unemployed  
 frictionally unemployed  
 structurally unemployed

Fifty seven percent of students responded correctly with answer (a). However, of those twenty students who correctly answered the music question correctly, 75% also got question 10 correct. Since this percentage is higher than the overall percentage for question 10 (63%), music does seem to increase a student's understanding of economic concepts.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Overall, students enjoy the use of music and lyrics in Introduction to Economics. However, there is little evidence that, in its current usage, music increases the students' own perceptions about their interest in or understanding of economics.

The current economic times may cause some selection bias: with economics again making headline news, students have become increasingly aware of the role of economics in their lives. This may lead to a small increase in the number of students who are in class because they are interested in economic events rather than because it is a required course.

Raechler (2009) found that music decreased absenteeism. While this survey did not track attendance in class specifically, there was one day when attendance was counted - on the day of the survey. The spring 2009 class with music had 43 registered students of which 34 completed the survey. However, in the fall 38 out of 41 registered students were in class on that day to complete the survey. Tracking of attendance throughout the semester would be needed to further confirm or deny the robustness of this observation.

The lack of any increase in student understanding of economics is in line with previous research. Raechler (2009) found that the average score of the final examination increased from fall 2007 to fall 2008, but not from fall 2006 to spring 2007. He admits that "all other conditions" may not be equal and future research should endeavor to include other variables that may be associated with higher exam scores.

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### **Appendix A: Student Survey**

#### **ECON 1810, Spring 2009**

Circle the response that best describes how far you agree with the following statements:

I enjoyed the use of music and lyrics in ECON 1810.

- 1 strongly agree
- 2 agree
- 3 neutral
- 4 disagree
- 5 strongly disagree

The use of music in ECON 1810 increased my interest in economics.

- 1 strongly agree
- 2 agree
- 3 neutral
- 4 disagree
- 5 strongly disagree

The use of music and lyrics in ECON 1810 helped me understand economic concepts.

- 1 strongly agree
- 2 agree
- 3 neutral
- 4 disagree
- 5 strongly disagree

The use of music and lyrics in ECON 1810 should be expanded.

- 1 strongly agree
- 2 agree
- 3 neutral
- 4 disagree
- 5 strongly disagree

Explain your answer to question 4. That is, how and why should music and lyrics be expanded? Why should it not? Please provide any other comments about the use of music and lyrics in ECON 1810 (continue on the back if necessary).

**Appendix B: Student Survey**  
**ECON 1810, Fall 2009**

Circle the response that best describes how far you agree with the following statements:

I enjoyed ECON 1810.

- 1 strongly agree
- 2 agree
- 3 neutral
- 4 disagree
- 5 strongly disagree

ECON 1810 increased my interest in economics.

- 1 strongly agree
- 2 agree
- 3 neutral
- 4 disagree
- 5 strongly disagree

ECON 1810 helped me understand economic concepts.

- 1 strongly agree
- 2 agree
- 3 neutral
- 4 disagree
- 5 strongly disagree