

Implementing Literary and Multimedia Materials Through Random Homework*

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2015

Abstract

Implementing non-textbook material in a classroom is difficult. Textbooks contain homework questions and online software. However, textbooks are also rarely read by the students even though the questions are designed to facilitate grading. Research has shown that learning is enhanced by variety such as popular press books, podcasts and videos. The problem has been that these mediums don't contain question banks: we solve this problem by developing software and placing it in the public domain. Educators upload a bank of questions where some set of items are randomly assigned to the students. The software is free, online, and extremely easy to install.

JEL classification: A10, A22

Keywords: teaching methods, software, Google Drive, economics & literature, undergraduate economics

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*The authors would like to thank Wayne Geerling, Mark Frank, Patricia Kuzyk and participants from the Washington State University School of Economics and their Graduate Student Association as well as participants at the 2013 National Economics Teaching Association Conference.

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Do your students split your homework questions within a group? Are your students unable to connect theory to the real world? Do very few of your students read the textbook? You are not alone.

The modern economics instructor faces an increasingly apathetic student. Many times they split their homework assignment among a group of friends, thereby learning only a fraction of the concepts. They study just enough for test recognition, but not enough for deep learning. This article, and the associated tool, is here to help.

‘Create Random Assignments’ (CRA) is a cloud based random homework generator. It takes any spreadsheet as a question bank and thus can be used for a wide number of applications including: random popular press homework assignments, random exams, and podcast/video comprehension homeworks. In essence, CRA gives the instructor the ability to reduce cheating and increase comprehension through randomness. It is already widely used in the educational community with more than 4,700 active Google Chrome users each week.

A complete set of instructions are included in the Appendix, but we start with an overview of how it works. CRA runs within Google Drive. It requires two inputs: a spreadsheet with a list of students and a spreadsheet with a list of questions. With these two sheets, it generates unique assignments for each student. It can deliver these assignments as individually shared Google Drive documents, PDFs over e-mail or one large printout (in the case of an exam). Individual answer keys are also generated to assist with grading.

1 Textbooks, Reading and Understanding

An examination of the literature around textbook reading is frightening. Schneider (2001) claimed that only 17% of introductory macroeconomic students completed all assigned readings. While the situation is likely not so dismal, other research in this area are only positive by comparison. Sikorski et al. (2002) examined the textbook study behavior at two distinct universities: Auburn University (AU) and Emporia State University (ESU). While the universities have almost nothing in common

(AU is a large research university in the southeast, ESU is a small midwestern university), students used introductory psychology textbooks in a similar way. Between 78%-82% reported not reading the textbook, or reading it sparingly, for at least one introductory class. For the texts they read, it is not much better. In a given week, over eighty percent of students reported spending less than three hours reading their texts.

Fitzpatrick and McConnell (2008) studied the reading behavior of students in microeconomics. Students on average spent 82 minutes per chapter and most students visited a chapter a single time. Further, most had a negative mood (68%) while reading the chapter. Is this really of any surprise? Students consider the *writing* of a textbook to be paramount (Besser et al., 1999). Poorly written textbooks, even if filled with excellent content, could be problematic.

Even when students do read the textbook, the quality of reading depends on the type of student. Research in the field of accounting finds that higher overall GPA and class grade are highly correlated to deep reading – where the goal is to understand (Elias, 2005). However, poor students try to ‘get through’ the material, skipping anything that is too difficult (Phillips and Phillips, 2007).

But students’ reading behavior is connected to the assessments. While multiple choice exams are the dominate form of assessment in economics (Becker and Watts, 2001b), their assessment value depends the learning goals of the instructor. While Walstad and Becker (1994) found that multiple choice exams could be as effective as constructed responses, a more extensive literature review by Simkin and Kuechler (2005) reveals a more complex story. The literature is at best mixed, but on balance multiple choice exams can lead to less complex thinking (Martinez, 1999; Traub and MacRury, 1990).

A larger concern is how students anticipate multiple choice assessments and thereby adjust their study strategies. A study by Scouller (1998) found that students employ surface learning approaches when they will be assessed by multiple choice and deeper learning strategies when assessed by an essay. A nuanced view of the situation was offered by Simkin and Kuechler (2005): assessment at the third level or higher of Bloom’s taxonomy is very difficult by multiple choice.

Clearly multiple choice assessments have their place and can behave as well as written responses under some circumstances. However, a mixture of assessment techniques can lead to a mix of studying strategies. Our tool allows an instructor to add higher level learning assessments at relatively low cost.

2 The Current State of the Economics Classroom

Many instructors continue to use the “chalk and talk” method (Becker and Watts, 1996, 2001a,b; Watts and Becker, 2008), and students even remember those lessons as “chalk and talk” type lectures (Allgood et al., 2004). While the number has probably grown since the 2005 sample, Watts and Schaur (2011) find that only a small minority of instructors are using a wide variety of teaching methods and assignments.

Learning is often enhanced by variety (Halpern and Hakel, 2003), even though economics instructors have been reluctant to introduce variety inside and outside of the classroom. In their continuing study, Watts and Schaur (2011) find that instructors across economics courses report very few references to literature, drama, or music as part of their classroom activities. The median instructor uses 6% of their class time for the discussion or inclusion of these references to the material being taught, which is stable across all types of economics courses. While most class time is dedicated to understanding the underlying theory, outside reading as part of homework can reinforce the material and provide real-world application of the theory.

Use of press readings in the median classroom accounts for roughly 22% of assigned print or electronic material in both introductory courses and upper-level field courses. Overall, Watts and Schaur (2011) find that to be a relatively consistent value at the median, while the mean has fallen slightly since their 2005 study. Upper level field-courses have perhaps the easiest ability to utilize popular press books because many books are targeted to specific genres like sports, transportation, and health care. However, because principles courses are often very broad in nature,

utilizing chapters or subsections of literature could enhance the overall application of material, while maintaining the broad application.

As noted by Hansen et al. (2002), traditional college principles courses are missing an opportunity to improve economic literacy by abstaining from issuing literature throughout the course. In literacy-targeted courses prescribed by the authors, students study a “short list” of concepts that they can master and use the rest of their lives. Gilleskie and Salemi (2012) find that students completing literacy-targeted courses perform no differently in intermediate courses than those that complete a traditional economics course. However, the primary difference is the effect that literacy based courses can have on non-economics majors at the introductory levels. With only 2% of students in principles courses becoming economics majors (Hansen et al., 2002), literacy based courses can prove invaluable to non-majors.

Learning and retention are increased by the use of memorable, interesting and captivating stories (Bransford et al., 2000), which are often the foundation of popular press books, podcasts and videos. Typically, their selling point is that they explore interesting topics or new views on popular and socially controversial topics. This enhanced learning can also contribute to students ability to increase their verbal communications skills if they are required to interpret economic theory with narratives (Watts, 2003). Further, if a student is interested in the content, they will read longer and at a deeper level (Biggs, 1987).

3 The Solution

Many education researchers have already started to identify resources for implementing reading requirements at both the principles and intermediate level. Table 1 provides interested instructors a brief set of academic works that relate literature to various course concepts. While not a complete list, this table provides a starting point for educators interested in supplementing regular course material with literature based examples. We augment this list with our own suggested readings, podcasts and videos for a principals course in Appendix B.

Table 1: A Brief Overview of Past Academic Work Citing Major Literature for Use in Economics Course

Citation	Books Discussed	Ideal Course Adoption
Miller and Watts (2011)	Complete work of Dr. Seuss	Principles, Environmental
Vachris and Bohanon (2012)	<i>Sister Carrie, The Grapes of Wrath, McTeague: A Story of San Francisco, Moby Dick, Seraph on the Suwanee</i>	Labor
Watts and Smith (1989)	Various works of literature and poetry	Principles, Labor
Watts (2003)	Anthology of various literature	Principles

Again, researchers in economics have identified problems surrounding a lack of reading and variety based education in economics course, and have provided solutions to overcome the challenge of reading vast quantities of literature and news articles to incorporate relatively few passages into a course.

We present the following tool, *Create Random Assignments*, that bridges the gap for instructors between problem and solution. This tool provides educators with a quick, simple, and collaborative way to engage students in readings and ensure academic integrity.

4 The Tool

Create Random Assignments (CRA) was initially designed to provide random questions from a question bank intended to quiz students on various components of a reading, while maintaining academic integrity by not issuing identical homework to each student. While its initial intent was based on short, simple questions, the tool can be used for a variety of uses beyond homework assignments. The tool can generate any document type using questions from a question bank. If

instructors wish to create unique exams, pop quizzes, or study guides, the tool is flexible enough to accommodate such usage.

Assignments generated with CRA changes the incentive structure for students. A common practice in some undergraduate classes is to work with a group and “split” the assignment. This means that any individual student can miss large chunks of the intended class content. By randomizing assignments among peers, students are limited in the amount of material that can be gleaned from their classmates.

One key goal of the tool is to minimize dependencies. CRA is hosted on Google Drive; the assignments are created on Drive and the instructor maintains questions on Drive. What this means for the user is that CRA is not dependent on institutional networks or systems. Faculty can assign work using any computer connected to the internet because the material and software is entirely stored on digital networks.

5 Classroom Application

Popular press reading assignments

The initial design of this tool was intended to help facilitate the assessment process of student literacy. Instructors must identify reading selections that cover relevant topics to their course. The selection can be entire books, select chapters, or sections of chapters. After building question banks, CRA can pull random questions from that chapter.

The advantage in using this application with reading assignments is that students have the ability to work on longer passages of books over multiple weeks while completing the homework. Instructors may assign 2-3 popular press books for an entire course, with homework assignments covering various chapters from each book.

Current event and podcast reading assignments

Creating smaller question banks, instructors can assign current reading assignments from online blogs, news outlets and podcasts, which require the student to answer factual based questions to ensure the student has at least read the required material for the upcoming class.

A secondary function enables instructors to link material to lessons from class and require students to demonstrate application of material to actual current events. Post lecture questions can be pulled that link readings with material learned in the course. Either method is facilitated by instructors uploading spreadsheets, and then instructing CRA to draw random questions for individual students.

Take home essays

The previous suggestions assume that students are required to read some sort of book or article prior to completing the assignment, but CRA is not limited to a reading requirement. Instructors can just as easily create a question bank of essay prompts or applied problems with each question being slightly different. For example, instructors can easily develop a bank of ten questions based on the five factors that either increase (five questions) or decrease (five questions) demand. The result is that a group of students may receive questions about increasing populations, while another set receive a prompt about decreasing populations.

The difficulty level is the same across the ten questions; however, it reduces the students' ability to work with other students if they do not have the same problem. If two students with different questions do work together, they will be required to discuss the differences between their questions. The essay prompts could be issued after class and returned the next day. This may also be designed to fulfill potential writing assignments required by some universities.

Short answer exams

Short answer exams could be created for both in-class and take-home use. Instead of sharing the file with students through their e-mails, instructors have the ability to generate a large set of individualized exams that have short answer questions. Again, instructors can maintain the difficulty of each exam by creating a question bank with minor variations of the problems.

Instructors would disperse and collect all assignments with physical copies in the classroom on the day of the exam. After the exams are ordered, the answer key allows the instructor to grade in order of the student list supplied to CRA.

6 Conclusion

The necessity of variety is well established in the literature. However, a major barrier to the use of popular press, podcasts and other non-textbooks is the lack of question banks. We solve this problem with a software solution that is free, easy to install and has few dependencies.

While our initial inspiration was popular press books and podcasts, our tool can be used for exams, current events readings, study guides or any other place where the assignment could benefit from randomness or non-traditional content sources. We believe this substantially increases the economics instructor's tool chest.

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Appendices

A Installing and Using “Create Random Assignments”

The installation of *Create Random Assignments* is simple. Go to the Chrome Web Store and click “Add to Chrome¹”.

Alternatively, you can install the code directly² by copying the code in to the Google Apps Scripts editor (available under the “create” menu in Google Drive).

A.1 Preparing Content for “Create Random Assignments”

Preparing content for the program is relatively easy, the instructor just needs two things:

1. A spreadsheet containing a list of questions
2. A spreadsheet containing a list of students

Each spreadsheet is stored in a separate file so that the instructor can keep a single file of students for use throughout the term and can save the question banks from term to term.

A.1.1 The Question Worksheet

From within a Google Drive spreadsheet, create the following header columns (the first row):

1. Question
2. Answer
3. Chapter (or Section)
4. Required

¹Available at: <http://goo.gl/nyFYyQ>

²Available at: <http://goo.gl/grvfhk>

5. Questions per Chapter

While *Question* is the only required field, *Answer* and *Chapter* will almost always be used. By supplying an answer to each question, this allows the program to build an answer key that is in the exact order of the question sheet for each student. The *Chapter* or *Section* allows the instructor to group questions such that the material is equally covered.

Required takes a boolean value (in the form of “yes”/“no”, “y”/“n”, “true”/“false” or “t”/“f”), and allows the instructor to force a question on to the assignment. Finally, *Questions per Chapter* takes an integer value and overrides the default specified when running the program. This is useful if a chapter is more or less important than the other chapters in the spreadsheet.

Let’s take a look at an example (figure 1):

<u>question</u>	<u>answer</u>	<u>page</u>	<u>chapter</u>	<u>required</u>
In a world of "rich" and "poor" teams, the best players typically end up on teams that have what ability?	pay the most	8	SOW1	
Hakes and Sauer found what two stats relate to winning?	on-base percentage and slugging percentage	10	SOW1	Y
How large was the impact of on-base percentage compared to slugging for team wins?	Twice	10	SOW1	
What role do regressions play in economics?	test tubes	9	SOW1	
Who spent more than \$1.5 billion acquiring playing talent?	New York Yankees	13	SOW2	
From 1999 to 2008, no team won more regular season games than the	New York Yankees	13	SOW2	
The New York Yankees spent more than \$1.5 billion on	1999 and 2008	13	SOW2	
From 2000 to 2008, the Washington Redskins spent the	Half	13	SOW2	
Which team paid its players more than anyone else from	New York Rangers	13	SOW2	
In all sports, what percentage of variation in winning percentage is explained by	75%	13-14	SOW2	
In which two sports is a team's spending explained by	Basketball and football	14	SOW2	
In basketball and football, how much of the variation in	Less than 10 (ten) percent	14	SOW2	
It takes more than money to find what?	success in sports	14	SOW2	

Figure 1: The figure shows an example question spreadsheet. Note that you can have other columns in the spreadsheet that are unused by the assignment program (“page” in this case).

In this example, we have specified all but the “questions per chapter” column, as well as one column (page) unused by the program. The required column is set to “Y” for one question in figure 1 and therefore will always appear in the assignment.

A.1.2 The Student Worksheet

From within a Google Drive spreadsheet, create the following headers (the first row):

1. Name
2. E-Mail

Both fields are required. Note that the program considers E-Mail to be a unique key. So, even when not sending the assignment over E-Mail (e.g. an exam) specifying a unique value in the E-Mail column is a must.

Under some sets of options, the generated files will have the Google Drive permissions modified such that the student can edit the file directly. In this circumstance, it may be advisable to ask the students for the E-Mail address they have registered with Google.

Name	E-Mail
Liam Ince	liam.ince@example.
Evan Short	evan.short@exampl
Olivia Young	olivia.young@examj
David Lawrence	david.lawrence@exa
Ella Payne	ella.payne@exampl
Lucas Hunter	lucas.hunter@exam
Dorothy Ogden	dorothy.ogden@exa
Nicola Ball	nicola.ball@example
Claire Nolan	claire.nolan@examp
Paul Scott	paul.scott@example

Figure 2: List of students in Google Spreadsheets

A.2 Using the Program

Once the program is launched, the instructor has a number of options to choose from (figure 3):

1. Assignment name
2. Spreadsheet with questions
3. Spreadsheet with students
4. Default number of questions
5. Create individual files
6. Notify student via E-Mail

Assignment name: SOW Homework

Spreadsheet with questions: Stumbling On Wins Questions

Spreadsheet with students: Students

Default number of questions per chapter: 5

Create individual files

Notify student via E-Mail

E-Mail subject line: Homework from Profe

Send file

Allow access for anyone with a link

Read only

Individual Answer Keys

Limit range

Start: End:

Create File(s)

[Need help? Get the documentation here.](#)

Figure 3: Assignment generator options

7. E-Mail subject line
8. Allow access for anyone with link
9. Read only
10. Individual Answer Keys
11. Limit range

Assignment name serves two purposes; it titles each assignment and it creates a new folder inside of Google Drive where all generated files exist. The two spreadsheet questions allow the instructor to specify the files containing questions and students (discussed in section A.1) and the *Default number of questions* specifies the default number of questions per chapter.

The checkboxes determine how the assignment is generated. If *Create individual files* is unchecked, a single file is generated containing the questions for every student, with a page break between students. Leaving this unchecked is appropriate when printing the assignment and handing it out in class. However, a great deal more is possible with the creation of individual files.

If creating individual files, the default behavior is to create a homework file for each student where the student is added as an “editor” and the instructor remains the owner. Under this scenario, the student is able to work directly in Google Drive on their assignment and the instructor is able to grade it by adding comments.

However, one can also notify the student via E-Mail that a new assignment exists (modifying the subject line helps prevent the E-Mail from being flagged as spam). This sends the student a link to the newly create assignment and (optionally) a PDF of the assignment.

Allow access for anyone with link is available for situations where the instructor is unsure that the students have Google accounts. Under this setting, the student isn’t added as an editor, but instead the document’s permissions are set such that anyone with the URL to the document is permitted to edit. The advantage to this setting is that the instructor knows, unambiguously, the

student will have access to the document. However, due to the potential interception of the E-Mail containing the link, it may be in violation of your institution's interpretation of FERPA.

Read only switches the student's or document's permissions from edit to read only. This allows the instructor to send out an assignment, but forces the student to download it and hand it in separately from Google Drive.

Finally, *individual answer keys* generates separate answer key files for each student instead of a single, long file, containing the key for each student with page breaks in-between.

When you are ready to run the generator, click "Create File(s)". In red text, "Running..." will appear on the top of the interface. Once the generator is done, this text will change to indicate that there is new files inside of your Google Drive account.

A.2.1 Using the Generator with Large Classes

There are two limits in Google Drive to be concerned with: a six minute execution time limit for any app and a 500 messages per day limit imposed by GMail (as well as an unknown hourly limit – though some believe it is approximately 100). Generating a homework assignment for a class of 75 with 30 questions generated per student takes nearly six minutes (though, execution time can vary). So, what's the solution?

Limit range allows the instructor to specify a start and end student for each run. So, suppose you have a class of 100. You might split this into two runs: the first with the limits set at "1" for *Start* and "50" for *End*, and a second run with "51" for *Start* and "100" for *End*. This would generate the assignment for the first 50 students in your student spreadsheet file in the first run and the 51st through 100th in the second run.

A.3 Output

As seen in figure 4, each assignment is titled with the assignment name followed by the student's name and email address. Then each question is numbered allowing space for the student to answer

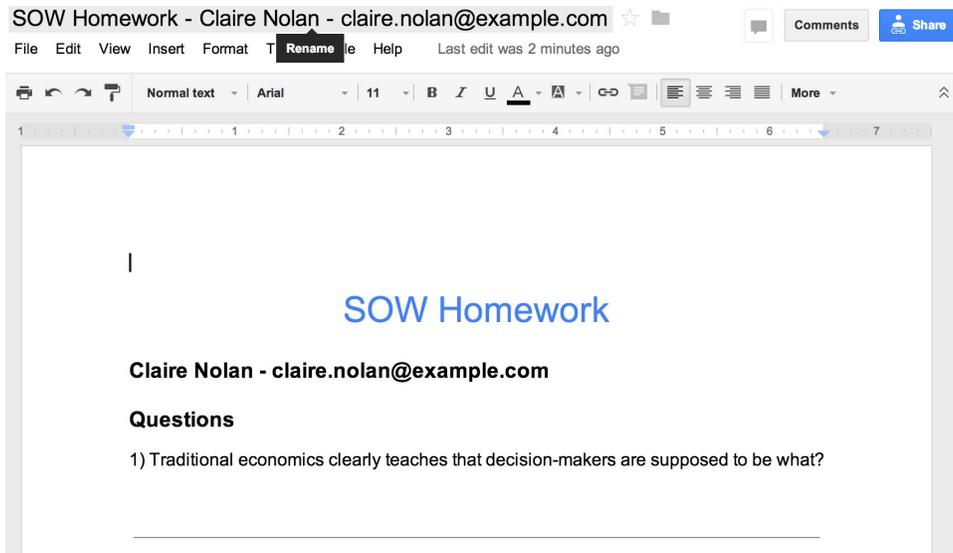


Figure 4: This shows a sample output for an individual student.

the question.

B Sample Econ 101 Assignments

Table 2: Possible Articles, Videos and Podcasts for Use in Principals of Microeconomics

Topic	Title	Link
Decisions at the Margin (Why are you here?)	Freakonomics Goes to College Part 1	http://goo.gl/CyeB1N
Supply and Demand	New Laws Chart Course for Marijuana Legalization	http://goo.gl/TyrQln
Supply and Demand	Rent in Williston N.D. tops averages in New York City and Los Angeles	http://goo.gl/s0XJN8
Supply and Demand	The Economics of Chicken Feet and Other Parts	http://goo.gl/IO5ac8
Supply and Demand	The 10 Fastest-Rising Food Prices at the Grocery	http://goo.gl/kQJ4X5
Elasticity	How to Make People Quit Smoking	http://goo.gl/dE8Lhl
Price Controls	De Blasio Picks 5 Members for Rent Board	http://goo.gl/N8uyhx

Continued on next page

Table 2 Continued from previous page

Topic	Title	Link
Price Controls	Washington City Votes to Raise Minimum Wage to \$15	http://goo.gl/S4h24K
Trade	The “Bottom Billion”	http://goo.gl/Z2PZxf
Behavioral	A Monkey Economy as Irrational as Ours	http://goo.gl/qX15Qv
Perfect Competition	RBC Joins Goldman Sachs in Supporting New Stock Market	http://goo.gl/xiZwY7
Monopolies	Men Who Built America Ep: Oil Strike 14:49-26:20	http://goo.gl/2uF0Cv
Oligopoly	NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma	http://goo.gl/32UOXg
Market Power	Hate Your Cable Company? Economics Explains Why	http://goo.gl/yrisgi
Monopolistic Competition	Can You Name These Cities by Their Starbucks Locations?	http://goo.gl/0JoD0j
Externalities	How the Market Can Keep Streams Flowing	http://goo.gl/sM1PSF
Externalities	Sriracha Hot Sauce Saved - For Now - as Factory Operates Through Legal Battle	http://goo.gl/VdERgg
Public Goods	Wikipedia vs. the Small Screen	http://goo.gl/HCH0K1