

Seinfeld and Economics: How to Achieve the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy in an Introductory Economics Class

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This paper presents an innovative teaching technique, the utilization of a popular sitcom to teach an introductory economics course. Using clips from the television show *Seinfeld*, instructors can present the oft-perceived difficult, yet basic, economic concepts in an amenable manner, which also enables the achieving of higher levels of learning as per Bloom's taxonomy. Many higher education institutions require an economics course as part of the general education curriculum. These courses typically tend to have high rates of failure relative to other required general education classes. One pedagogical tool to improve pass rates is to use Seinfeld Economics. A typical assignment based on an episode is provided in the appendix to further help adopt this pedagogical tool.

While there have been many calls for the use of more creative teaching techniques in introductory economics classes, evidence indicates that the "chalk and talk" approach is still the dominant pedagogy at most schools (Becker, 2000; Becker & Watts, 1996; Colander, 2006). Survey results from 2010 indicated that approximately 83% of content delivery in introductory or pre-introductory economics classes is done through a traditional lecture format (Watts & Schaur, 2011). There has been little evidence of change in the previous decade and a half, when the same amount of content was delivered via a traditional lecture approach (Becker & Watts, 1996). One active-learning technique often employed in other disciplines is the use of videos (e.g., television, movies, documentaries) to introduce new material, elaborate on difficult concepts, and motivate classroom discussion. Watts and Becker (2008) found that only 6% or 7% of content delivery incorporates the use of DVDs or VCRs in the classroom. While less frequently employed in economics, recent publications have promoted the use of television (Sexton, 2006), films, and documentaries (Leet & Houser, 2003).

In particular, Luccasen and Thomas (2010) used episodes from the FOX animated television show *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989-2014) to demonstrate basic economic concepts, while Considine (2006) demonstrated that the same series can be used to teach economics of public choice issues. Lucassen and Thomas (2010) described how scenes in the series can be used to demonstrate a variety of economic concepts, including declining marginal benefits, comparative advantage, and externalities. In addition to providing descriptions of the relevant scenes, they provided an example of a learning assignment for declining marginal benefits constructed from the material in *The Simpsons* episode *Bart Gets Famous* (Swartzwelder & Dietter, 1994). Considine (2006) concentrated on making a connection between *The Simpsons* and the satirical public choice tradition of

Swift and Orwell, but provided a limited number of examples and no learning assignments. In both cases, the authors encouraged fellow educators to incorporate television clips as an additional tool in their teaching toolkits, but did not explore the possibility of using these television clips to help the student obtain a particular set of learning outcomes, such as those contained in the Bloom's revised taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), a hierarchical structure of learning.

In our experience, many students consider economics to be the "dismal science" due to their perception that economics is difficult, boring, and not particularly relevant to their concerns. Given these perceptions and the poor learning outcomes often associated with "chalk and talk" pedagogy (Becker & Watts, 1996), we posit that the employment of other teaching techniques, such as use of television clips, may provide potential benefits to both student and instructor. We have found that one of the major challenges in teaching introductory economics is to gain the students' attention. Since many of our students have spent (and continue to spend) many hours watching television, its use in the classroom connects with a sense of familiarity shared by most students. As a result, it is much easier to command their attention and involvement. In our experience, using television episodes makes it easier to convey often difficult (at least in the student's perception) theoretical concepts if the student can anchor the concept to something with which they are familiar. This anchoring can improve initial comprehension, while also facilitating long-term retention. The use of media in the classroom also provides another method to obtain the higher levels of learning described in Bloom's revised taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002; see following discussion). Finally, there is a general consensus that students at the introductory level do not receive adequate writing opportunities. The use of television clips provides the instructor additional

opportunities to assign writing assignments such as short reflection papers on the economic concepts contained within the clip.

This paper demonstrates how a popular television series, *Seinfeld* (David & Seinfeld, 1989-1998), can be used to facilitate a presentation of microeconomic principles. In particular, we present a discussion of material from *The Soup Nazi* (Feresten & Ackerman, 1995) episode, which contains examples that can be used to teach a variety of concepts related to market allocation and market structure. While a number of television series contain economic concepts, *Seinfeld* is exceptionally well suited for use in introductory classes. *Seinfeld*, a show about the lives of four friends in New York City, is primarily a show about the minutiae of daily life. While many people associate economics with business and finance, economics is essentially about how people make decisions in their daily lives. There are numerous examples of situations that can be used to demonstrate how the student can find economics in their daily lives. For example, the *Seinfeld* episode *The Nonfat Yogurt* demonstrates the impact of perceived product characteristics on people's demand for a good. In addition to relevance of topics, the nine seasons of *Seinfeld* contain a large number of episodes demonstrating a wide variety of economic concepts. The show also continues to be popular in syndication, thus making it accessible, relevant, and current. In addition to its application to economics, *Seinfeld* provides numerous examples that can be used in sociology, philosophy, and gender studies. You can even find books on sociology, such as Delany's (2006) *Seinology: The Sociology of Seinfeld*, and philosophy, such as Erwin's (1999) *Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book about Nothing and Everything*.

Bloom's Revised Taxonomy

Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956), a delineation of educational objectives, has been employed by educators over the last fifty years for the construction of learning goals, the creation of assessment tools (including exam questions), and other efforts to coordinate best practices with cognitive development theory. Bloom et al.'s (1956) taxonomy represents a hierarchical structure of learning, ranging from the simple and concrete (i.e., obtaining knowledge) to the complex and abstract (i.e., synthesizing and evaluating relationships and evidence). While some have criticized the hierarchical structure of the taxonomy (e.g., Wineberg & Schneider, 2010), often represented as a pyramid in posters displayed in classrooms, it has continued to enjoy widespread use at all levels of education in the United States and around the world since its inception (Krathwohl, 2002).

The original taxonomy was revised in 2001 (Krathwohl, 2002) to focus on the active nature of learning (e.g., the category "knowledge" was changed to "remembering") and to more clearly capture the duality of learning (i.e., the cognitive versus knowledge dimension). The foundation of learning (i.e., the building block at the base of the pyramid), is remembering, which includes a recollection of basic terminology and facts associated with a specific area of study (Krathwohl, 2002). For example, an introductory economics student is expected to know the concept of supply and demand and factors that shift supply and/or demand curves. "Understanding," the next level in the pyramid, is achieved when the student can restate an idea in his/her own words, provide an example of a concept, or extrapolate a trend (Krathwohl, 2002). The student should be able to provide a real-world example of supply and demand or state how a market would reach equilibrium, in non-technical words.

The third level of the taxonomy, "applying," is achieved if the student can apply concepts to a new problem that embodies those concepts in a different way than originally presented (Krathwohl, 2002). For example, the student in economics can be confronted with a description of conditions in a market and asked to determine the impact of those conditions on market allocation. "Analyzing," the fourth level of the pyramid, requires the student to break down material into its component parts and determine how they fit together (Krathwohl, 2002). A student can be required to identify the assumptions underlying an efficient market allocation or demonstrate an understanding of causation versus correlation when analyzing data presented in graphical form. The fifth level, "evaluating," requires the student to critique an idea or theory (Krathwohl, 2002). Students are able to accomplish this step in the revised taxonomy if they can demonstrate an ability to detect fallacious arguments and if they can effectively evaluate theories based on external evidence and internal consistency. For example, an economics student can be given a list of the characteristics of several market structures and then asked to evaluate them in terms of their efficiency or incentives for innovation. Finally, "creating" requires the student to reorganize parts of knowledge in a different form or develop a new theory to explain some set of facts (Krathwohl, 2002). An economics student might be asked to develop a theory to explain what would happen to aggregate output if private investment fell and the Federal Reserve responded by increasing the money supply, while Congress lowered the capital gains tax at the same time.

While the revised Bloom's taxonomy addressed some of the criticisms of the original Bloom's taxonomy, such as the failure to account for the active nature of learning, the revision still suffers from the criticism that it

imposes a hierarchical structure on learning outcomes. Critics often maintain that the sequential nature of the taxonomy does not mirror the cognitive processes employed in learning (Furst, 1981; Wineberg & Schneider, 2010). For example, the lowest levels of Bloom's revised taxonomy are remembering and understanding, but the attainment of these levels can often be accomplished through the presentation of real-world applications (a higher level of learning; Krathwohl, 2002). While we are aware of these criticisms, we would argue that Bloom's taxonomy, or the revised taxonomy, is the most commonly used classification of learning outcomes, and therefore most educators are likely to be familiar with its application. We also would argue that the material in *Seinfeld* could be used to attain other sets of learning outcomes for teachers who did not employ the revised Bloom's taxonomy.

Seinfeld and Pedagogy

While *Seinfeld* contains a variety of economic concepts, this paper provides examples which center on market allocation and market structure issues. Market structure differences, centering on differences in the number of sellers and the nature of the product sold, determine the range of possible allocations in the market. For example, lack of competition allows a monopolist to charge a higher price for a good than would be possible with more competition. *The Soup Nazi* episode (Feresten & Ackerman, 1995), the primary example described in this paper, can be used to introduce monopolistic competition, monopoly, barriers to entry, elasticity of demand, and non-pecuniary pricing considerations.

In addition to *The Soup Nazi* episode, there are a number of episodes that can be used to demonstrate market structure and allocation decisions. In *The Race* (Gammill, Pross, David, & Ackerman, 1994), the characters provide a broad discussion of the differences between a communist system and a free market system. *The Sponge* (Mehlman & Ackerman, 1995) provides an example of the impact of scarcity and elasticity of demand, while *The Café* (Leopold & Cheronos, 1991) can be used to introduce monopolistic competition and product differentiation. The infamous episode about self-pleasure, *The Contest* (David & Cheronos, 1992) can be used to demonstrate cartels and rates of time preference, while *The Marine Biologist* (Hauge, Rubin, & Cheronos, 1994) contains examples of non-price competition.

There are a number of different approaches that can be employed to present economic concepts using *Seinfeld*, conditional on the goals of the instructor and knowledge level of students. For students with no knowledge of economic concepts, the instructor can show the episode, identify and define the concepts,

present the economic theory underlying the concepts, and then identify examples from the show. For students with some knowledge concerning the economic concepts (e.g., those who have completed assigned readings on the topic), the instructor can show the episode, identify the concepts, review the theory, and then have the students identify the examples in the episode. At an even higher level of understanding, the students can be required to identify certain concepts and examples after viewing the episode. A wide variety of writing assignments (e.g., see Appendix), classroom discussions, and classroom experiments can be integrated into each of these approaches. Given that instructors often feel like they have a limited amount of time to convey information in the classroom, they can use short segments of the episode to demonstrate the concepts. The website, *The Economics of Seinfeld*, created by economists Linda Ghent and Alan Grant with graduate student George Lesica, contains brief descriptions of economic concepts contained in *Seinfeld* and short film clips from the series to demonstrate those concepts (Ghent, Grant, & Lesica, 2010).

The Soup Nazi Episode

The Soup Nazi (Feresten & Ackerman, 1995) episode tells the story of a temperamental restaurant owner/chef discovered by Jerry Seinfeld's (i.e., the main character's) neighbor Kramer. After trying the soup stand, Jerry described the soup as "soup that will leave you stunned and make your knees buckle" (Feresten & Ackerman, 1995). Given his temperamental ordering system, his customers "callously" referred to the chef as the "Soup Nazi." A customer was to approach the counter, speak their order in a clear manner, take two steps to the left, hand their money to the cashier, pick-up the order, and then exit the soup stand. If someone chose to violate this ordering procedure, the Soup Nazi reserved the right to refuse service. For example, after following closely the ordering process, George asked for bread upon receiving his soup. The Soup Nazi told George that there was an extra \$2.00 charge for bread, but George pointed out that all other customers received their bread for free. At this point, the Soup Nazi told George that he could not have soup and the cashier retrieved the soup and refunded George his money. Depending on the seriousness of an infraction of the ordering procedure, a customer could be banned from the soup stand for up to a year. Later in the episode, Elaine was banned from the stand for a year for failing to follow proper ordering procedures and engaging the Soup Nazi in a conversation about his perceived resemblance to Al Pacino.

Because there were many other restaurants in the city (probably including many selling soup) and his product was highly differentiated, the Soup Nazi competed in a monopolistically competitive market.

However, the quality of the soup and the customers' devotion to it essentially gave the Soup Nazi a monopoly. This was evidenced by Kenny Bania's (a fellow comic who often annoyed Jerry by "riding his coattails") remark to Jerry that the Soup Nazi made the best soup in the city. Evidence was also provided by the extreme conditions that the customers were willing to meet to be "eligible" to purchase soup.

While an unregulated monopolist should be able to charge the maximum price that a consumer is willing to pay for quantity of a good the monopolist provides to the market, this episode does not indicate that the price charged by the Soup Nazi is unreasonably high, as might be with a monopolist. He could be considered a discriminating monopolist by charging people what they are willing to pay with regard to non-pecuniary costs. For instance, Jerry and his girlfriend Sheila were caught kissing in line. The Soup Nazi said, "There is no kissing in my line" (Feresten & Ackerman, 1995). Sheila's willingness to pay for the soup was much lower than Jerry's willingness to pay. She was offended by his demand and said that she would kiss her boyfriend anywhere she wished and demanded that Jerry walk out with her. However, Jerry's willingness to pay for soup was much higher than Sheila's, and he pretended to not know her and stayed in line, even as Sheila left. His reasoning was that it would be easier to make up with Sheila than it would be to make up with the Soup Nazi, who could ban him from the store. This scene, and other scenes related to the high willingness to pay for the soup, can be used to demonstrate the concept of elasticity of demand. The high willingness to pay, at least with reference to non-pecuniary costs, would indicate that the demand for soup was very inelastic. The highly inelastic nature of the demand is primarily a function of the lack of close substitutes.

The Soup Nazi's monopoly was maintained due to a barrier to entry; proprietary information associated with the recipes for his soup. When Kramer gave Elaine an antique armoire to replace the one stolen while he was guarding it for her, he informed her that the Soup Nazi provided the armoire, and she went to the restaurant to thank him. After being rebuffed by the Soup Nazi once again, she discovered his recipes in the armoire. Angry because of her exile from the soup stand and rude treatment when she attempted to show her appreciation for the armoire, Elaine threatened to publish the recipes, thus removing the barrier to entry. She said to him, "You are through, Soup Nazi. No more soup for you" (Feresten & Ackerman, 1995). He then closed his store and moved to Argentina.

Taxonomy and The Soup Nazi Episode

As previously described, *The Soup Nazi* episode contains a number of economic concepts, including

monopoly, monopolistic competition, non-pecuniary costs, barriers to entry, and elasticity of demand. An instructor can use this episode to define concepts and allow students to summarize the concept in their own words, possibly using examples from the episode. A short writing assignment can be used to allow students to provide other examples to illustrate the same basic concepts. While we believe that this exercise works best in small to medium sized classes (i.e., up to 40 students), it can also work in larger classrooms. We suggest that the instructor divide the class into groups and have each student write a short paper within their group, with one paper being reported to the class. Basic understanding of the concept (remembering) and the ability to restate the concept in their own words or provide alternative examples of the concept (understanding) satisfies the first two levels of the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002).

To achieve the third level of the revised Bloom's taxonomy (applying), students must be able to apply the learned concept to a different situation (Krathwohl, 2002). For example, students could be asked to find a real-world example of a monopoly or monopolistically competitive firm and relate the characteristics of that firm to those embodied by the Soup Nazi. Alternatively, the students could be asked to apply the basic concepts to another television series or movie. For example, the *Flaming Moe* (Selman & Sheetz, 2011) episode of *The Simpsons* contains a similar monopoly situation, with a proprietary information barrier to entry. Moe Szyslak, the owner of Moe's Tavern, took credit for a drink invented by Homer Simpson (one of the main characters) when the drink became very popular. Homer got upset that Moe took all of the credit for his invention and subsequently made the key ingredient—cough syrup—public knowledge, whereby other bars with similar drinks appeared and eliminated Moe's monopoly power. This result was very similar to the likely impact if Elaine had published the soup recipes in *The Soup Nazi*. A comparison of the two episodes would require the students to apply what they learned in the Soup Nazi episode to a similar situation.

Among other things, the fourth level of the revised Bloom's taxonomy (analyzing) requires students to find underlying assumptions and identify causal relationships (Krathwohl, 2002). While *The Soup Nazi* episode presents outcomes associated with monopoly power (in this case, the ability of the seller to control the conditions in which they sell the product), the episode does not directly address the underlying assumptions that separate the different market structures. Using this episode as a starting point, the instructor can then provide the student with a list of market outcomes and a list of underlying assumptions, and let the students analyze connections between the assumptions and the outcomes. For example, complete

control over conditions in which a good is sold, such as that exhibited by the Soup Nazi, would not likely result from a market with a homogeneous product and a lot of competition. The instructor could also ask students to identify the causal connections between the assumptions and outcomes, such as the fact that the lack of perceived substitutes would lead to more inelastic demand, and therefore allow the seller to charge a higher price (or, in *The Soup Nazi* episode, require adherence to a more rigid ordering process). See the Appendix for an example of an in-class assignment that can be used to achieve the first four levels of the revised Bloom's taxonomy. The levels achieved by each question are contained in the parentheses after the question within the Appendix.

The last two levels of the revised Bloom's taxonomy (evaluating and creating) are achieved when students are able to detect fallacious arguments or find and evaluate external evidence (evaluating) and construct a theory (creating) based on their understanding of the concepts and the relationships between the concepts and empirical evidence regarding the issue of interest (Krathwohl, 2002). The processes of evaluating and creating are often considered "critical thinking," and thus are student outcomes highly desired by most teachers (Krathwohl, 2002). These levels are very difficult to achieve (Krathwohl, 2002). In a review of economics textbooks, Karns, Burton, and Martin (1983) concluded that almost no textbooks even had a goal of reaching the higher-order levels of learning. Given the introductory nature of an introductory level course, an accomplishment of the first four levels of the revised Bloom's taxonomy through the use of *Seinfeld* episodes may signify a worthwhile and sufficient goal. Accomplishment of the final two levels of Bloom's taxonomy may require other pedagogical tools or may be postponed until intermediate level courses.

If an instructor decided to try accomplishing the final level of Bloom's taxonomy, creating, one possible approach would be to show two clips from the *Seinfeld* television series and have the students develop a theory to explain the results contained in the episodes. For example, *The Soup Nazi* and *The Maestro* both dealt with some form of monopoly power. In *The Maestro*, Kramer and his lawyer Jackie discussed suing a movie theater because Kramer was burnt by the hot coffee he snuck into the movies in order to avoid high prices charged by the movie theater. In each case, the monopoly power was created by some barrier to entry. Assuming that the students had been introduced to monopoly power but had not been exposed to the concept of barriers to entry, these episodes could be used to have students develop a theory as to why the Soup Nazi and the movie theater were able to exhibit some form of monopoly power.

Conclusions

While chalk and talk is still the dominant approach in the teaching of economics and any other social sciences (Watts & Schaur, 2011), other content delivery approaches, including the use of movie and television clips, have been promoted in the economic education literature (e.g., Considine, 2006; Leet & Houser, 2003; Lucasen & Thomas, 2010; Sexton, 2006). In this paper, we demonstrated how an episode of the television series *Seinfeld* could be used to illustrate economic concepts related to market structure and allocation. While we concentrated on one episode and a few related economic concepts, the nine seasons of *Seinfeld* cover a vast array of economic concepts, ranging from opportunity cost to price ceilings and asymmetric information. As a result, one could incorporate film clips from *Seinfeld* into almost any topic covered in an introductory economics class. Given the nature of the show, this type of activity can also take place in a sociology or a philosophy course (e.g., Delaney, 2006; Erwin, 1999).

Although some teachers may believe that television and film clips are entertainment and add no real value to an introductory class, we believe that our discussion of the viability of applying Bloom's revised taxonomy to the *Seinfeld* episode *The Soup Nazi* will encourage others to consider employing more television and film clips in the classroom. In addition to addressing the various levels of learning in Bloom's revised taxonomy, the use of the *Seinfeld* television series to present economic concepts and theories provides many opportunities to incorporate writing and oral presentation skills. One could also apply these techniques in a cultural anthropology class. For instance, the episode *The Cigar Store Indian* (Gammill, Pross, & Cheronis, 1993) has excellent examples of race relations among the different characters. Finally, the use of *Seinfeld* and other popular television series or movies may help to engage the students without sacrificing rigor and content, in addition to helping keep the content fresh and interesting for the instructor.

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Appendix
In-Class Assignment for the *Soup Nazi* Episode

1. What type of market structure is represented by the Soup Nazi? What evidence is provided in the episode to justify this conclusion? (remembering)
2. Market power is often exercised with control over the selling price of the good. How did the Soup Nazi exhibit market power? How did that power change by the end of the episode? (remembering and understanding)
3. Give real-world examples of firms in a monopolistic and a monopolistically competitive industry. How did those firms compare to the Soup Nazi? (applying)
4. What is price discrimination? Were there any examples of price discrimination in the episode? If so, describe those situations. If not, what other information would you need (not provided in the episode) to make a case for the existence of price discrimination? (remembering, understanding, and analyzing)
5. Other than issues related to market structure, what other economic concepts could you find in this episode. Identify the concept and briefly describe how it was used in the episode. (remembering and understanding)