

Teaching and Learning Economics through Cinema

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Introduction

In July 2006 the author and a small team of colleagues received funding from the Economics Network of the Higher Education Authority to enable the development of a new module which aims to teach economics through the arts, in particular through the use of cinema and literature.

The motivations of the module project were manifold:

- To increase the participation of non-mathematically inclined students, which represent a significant fraction of the total student population reading economics at London Metropolitan University;
- To relate the study of economics more closely to students' lives, using real life illustrations;
- To present the subject of economics in an aesthetically pleasing way, thus offering an alternative to mathematical elegance;
- To treat the subject in a multidisciplinary manner, enabling students to see the link with other social sciences;
- To present the subject in its historical context, in contrast with the present mainstream approach;
- To present a multicultural array of films and works of literature consistent with the wide range of cultural backgrounds of London Metropolitan University students.

It quickly became clear very within the preparatory work for the module that the use of cinema would offer certain advantages over using works of literature, mainly because film is a very popular medium among students and again, it takes much less time to watch film clips than to read passages from a novel or other work of literature. As a result, the module was piloted using film clips, however, since many of the film clips appropriate to the aim of the project are cinematic adaptations of famous works of literature, the distinction between using films and works of literature is somewhat lessened. Nevertheless, this remains an important point, as those two forms of media may well appeal to different student audiences.

The idea of teaching economics with cinema is not new, and is practiced in a number of educational institutions in the United States. The approach used in that country is, however, quite different from the one proposed here and used in the pilot study. In the United State, modules are usually run in the students' first year presenting a variety of fundamental economic concepts such as opportunity cost, scarcity, asymmetric information and illustrating them using films (see, for example, Leet and Houser (2003)). The approach developed here is, in a sense, the reverse of that process since it is the medium of cinema which is allowed to inform and suggest the economic concepts that can be discussed through this medium. As a consequence, the range of topics covered is much wider and the approach also allows coverage of unconventional topics such as the economics of charities, dowries and the economics of crime.

Method and syllabus

The procedure used is as follows. Each week, a topic is declared and then clips are shown from one or more films to illustrate that topic. Afterward, a debate is facilitated by the use of questions that turn upon the real-world use – particularly the use in the students' own lives - of the concepts covered on film. Finally, to sustain the discussion with some rigorous analysis, related academic material is presented which may be theoretical, empirical or both.

To illustrate the point, set out below is a short table of films from which appropriate clips have been distilled and the economic concepts they are used to illustrate

FILM/LITERATURE	ECONOMIC CONCEPT ILLUSTRATED
<i>Death of a Salesman</i> (Arthur Miller)	Choice of profession, sense of self worth based on economic performance
<i>Grapes of Wrath</i> (John Steinback)	Property rights, migration, trade unions
<i>Oliver Twist</i> (Charles Dickens)	Economics of crime, economics of charities
<i>Rogue Trader/Wall Street</i>	Psychology of financial markets
<i>Balkanizateur</i>	Efficiency of capital markets
<i>La Terra Trema</i> (Visconti)	Poverty, risks of entrepreneurship
<i>Mother India</i>	Rural financial markets in poor countries
<i>Toplo</i>	Agency theory
<i>The Tycoon</i>	Emergence of crime in countries in transition from communist to market economics
<i>Ashani Snaket</i>	Economics of famine
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	Economics of dowries, economics of inheritance

The selection of films and the process described above reflects a belief that education should be a process of self-discovery, and currently, economics is rarely being taught with such a focus. For example, in a mainstream labour economics module, the attitudes attached to the human capital model are routinely shown –

here it is simply assumed that the expectation of a future wage determines one's choice of profession – in this case, as economist. However, remarkably, students are rarely asked why they chose to study economics and in a class poll of labour economics students, only about 10% said that they chose economics because it offered the prospect of an attractive wage; instead, many cited an interest in the subject. In this respect, the film 'Death of Salesman' cited above includes a dialogue lasting about 10 minutes between two youngsters at pains to decide their choice of profession in which they discuss the pros and cons of very different occupations.

Results of pilot study

The approach was piloted on four existing modules at London Metropolitan University, ensuring as far as possible that the content of the films shown matched that of each module as set out below:

1. Introduction to Macroeconomics. This is a 1st year module taken mainly by students reading economics. Here, clips of 'Balkanizateur' were shown;
2. Economics of Cinema. This is a 3rd year module taken by media studies students. Here, clips from 'Grapes of Wrath' were shown;
3. Economics of Industry. This is a 3rd year module taken almost entirely by economics students. Clips from 'Death of a Salesman' were shown;
4. International Business Studies. This module is part of the MSc in International Business and students come from varying backgrounds. Again, clips from 'Death of a Salesman' were shown.

Each session lasted about half an hour, with 20 minutes of clips and 10 minutes of discussion. Student responses were assessed by means of a questionnaire. 45 questionnaires were returned, of which 25 were complete. Some of the responses are shown below:

- *"It is good to visualize real life examples and to chain them to theory"*
- *"I found the material that was shown relevant to my life situation"*
- *"The movie is quite old so the relevance is minimal"*
- *"It uses a media which young people grow up with"*
- *"One picture says a thousand words"*
- *"people can discuss the matter in relation to their experience"*
- *"It bring the very relevant aspect of behavioural economics into the picture"*
- *"It's the best session I have ever had"*
- *"The module would be good before uni"*
- *"It gives economics students an opportunity to relate to the arts and approach things from a different perspective"*
- *"Seeing a film and relating it to real life is fascinating"*

Clearly most responses were favourable. I also asked students to rate the session they had attended:

Table 1. Students' overall ratings of session on economics through cinema

	Overall session rating (average score: 7 highest, 1 lowest)	% of students who think module should be introduced	"If you think module should be introduced, how useful would it be?" (average score shown, where 3 = hugely, 2 = a lot, 1 = a little)
Introduction to Macroeconomics	5.6	92%	2.1
Economics of Cinema	5.7	81%	2.1
Industrial Economics	5.6	77%	2.4
International Business Studies	5.9	83%	2.4

As the table shows, the overall session rating was high, closer to a 6 than a 5, where 6 is "very good" and 5 is "good". Note the stability of the rating in spite of the variation in the year of study. The vast majority of students thought the module should be introduced; again, the year of study makes little difference to the size of the majority. Finally, students who wanted the module introduced thought it would benefit students a lot, some even 'hugely'.

Students were also asked to assess particular aspects of the sessions:

Table 2. Students' ratings of aspects of the economics through cinema experience

	Average		Average
Film quality	5.60	Relevance to your life	5.39
Discussion quality	5.33	Economic content	5.15
Total time	4.67	Will you remember?	5.47
Distribution of time	5.09	Male	55%
Academic material	5.53	Econ or business degree	82%
Structure	5.47		

Scores from 1 to 7, 7 highest (except for male and econ degree)

From the results, students appear to appreciate the quality of the films they had seen, and, perhaps surprisingly, the quality of the academic material; this may indicate the students thought the academic material strongly related to the film, as hoped. Students did not like the total time spent on each session: I imagine that they wanted more time, either because they enjoyed the session and wanted more of the same, or because they felt they did not have enough time to properly evaluate the sessions.

Conclusion

A new module is proposed in which economics is taught through cinema. This module differs from similar modules taught mainly in the US, in that the range of topics is much broader and the inter-disciplinary nature of economics is brought to the fore. The results of the pilot study in four existing modules at London Metropolitan University show that there are students who very much appreciate the teaching and learning of economics through this medium. There is strong evidence that the syllabus should be developed to completion and that the module should be offered to students.

References

Leet, D. and Houser, S., (2003). Economics Goes to Hollywood: Using Classical Films and Documentaries to Create an Undergraduate Economics Course. *Journal of Economic Education* (Fall).

Biographical note

Gherardo Girardi is an economist with research interests in economics of industry, corporate social responsibility, microfinance and environmental economics. After obtaining his MSc in economics, he worked for two years in investment banking, mainly in derivative products. He then completed a PhD in economics at the London School of Economics. Gherardo has taught in a number of universities, both in the UK and abroad. He is currently senior lecturer at the University of Westminster and lecturer at London Metropolitan University. **Email:** g.girardi@londonmet.ac.uk