

CTL Fellows Final Project: Policy Analysis in the Classroom

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Project Description

My CTL fellows project, entitled “Policy Analysis in the Classroom”, concerns the supervision of independent student research. In particular, it focuses on the “Federal Reserve Challenge” project which I have been supervising as an extracurricular team and have incorporated into my elective course, Econ 304: Causes of and Best Responses to Recessions, during the last three years.

The Fed Challenge is a national competition where students analyze current economic conditions and provide recommendations for the Federal Reserve, the central bank of the U.S., in its conduct of monetary policy. As such, it provides a prime opportunity for students to make practical use of the knowledge they have acquired in the classroom. The teams in the competition are evaluated on the basis of their understanding of monetary policy, citation of advanced research, the aesthetics of their presentation, teamwork, and ability to field questions. I have asked students in Econ 304 to conduct a similar analysis for a non-U.S. country of their choosing.

Although this project is specific to macroeconomics, it holds broader relevance for other disciplines. Given that the analysis is conducted as a mock Federal Open Market Committee meeting, where the students act as if they are Fed officials deliberating over monetary policy, it bears a striking resemblance to project such as the model UN or mock trial. Moreover, developing students’ capabilities to apply general theories to novel settings is undoubtedly one of the overriding objectives of many courses.

The major pedagogical difficulty I sought to (partially) resolve in this fellowship was how to foster sophisticated student analyses while allowing the project to remain “their own” rather than simply telling them exactly what to say. This delicate balance of guiding, rather than delegating, research is one relevant to the supervision of all student-led research and thesis projects of every

major, perhaps in particular. It is also one I found myself struggling with during my first experience with advising a senior thesis. Pertinent to this project, I was also supervising the senior thesis seminar for the economics department this semester, in addition to supervising or co-supervising three of the senior theses in particular. In my prior iterations of thesis supervision and the Fed Challenge, I found myself being quite laissez faire early in the semester, letting students dictate the research agenda, but as deadlines approached I found it necessary to constrict and direct their activity to a larger degree than I (and perhaps they) would have liked, to ensure that there was some, reasonable final product on the needed day. I sought to find a means to take a more balanced and ultimately student-led approach. I believe that I was able to find a nice alternative, thanks in part to the many helpful suggestions of the other participants in the CTL fellows program.

Revised Approaches

I could sum up my revised approach with four techniques: modeling, scaffolding, peer critiques, and the Socratic method.

- 1.) **Modeling:** For both the class project and team, I started by providing them with some examples of the type of analysis they should emulate. I provided links to videos of FOMC press conferences, Fed Challenge presentations from the national competition, and scripts from Fed president speeches. Similarly, with the senior thesis seminar, I provided repeated examples of other research during each step of the thesis writing process.
- 2.) **Scaffolding:** This was a technique continually emphasized in our CTL meetings in relation to paper writing. I found that presentations could be developed using a similar system. I conducted all of the Fed challenge meetings by having students provide presentations on subsets related to the final presentation. For example, I would assign a student or two to present on various components such as inflation, the labor market, financial markets, or the international sector, which would later come to comprise portions of the final presentation. This was particularly beneficial since it helped them to practice their general presentational skills.

- 3.) Student critiques: One struggle I grappled with, particularly during the in-class presentations, was how to incentivize audience attentiveness and participation. Several other professors mentioned similar difficulties, where students would “zone out” when other students were speaking at length. One way I dealt with this was to have each student complete feedback forms during other students’ presentations. The forms asked them to report what has been occurring most recently in the country of focus, what the presenters’ policy recommendation was, on what basis they made this claim, which evidence may contradict their argument or relevant information that was absent, which aspects of the presentation were particularly unclear or unconvincing, etc. This hopefully helped to generate some introspection when working on their own presentations. I also emphasized repeatedly that incisive student questions following presentations would be particularly weighted into their participation grade. These did seem to facilitate audience engagement.
- 4.) Socratic method: Rather than telling students exactly how to revise their presentations, I focused instead on asking questions to force them to assess the strength of their arguments and the viability of the claims they made. I would typically wait until the students had exhausted their questions and then would interrogate them with questions, playing devil’s advocate against every argument. This forced them to defend their assertions, acknowledge any missing elements of their analysis, and test whether they truly understand the concepts they referenced. It was particularly valuable in that it again “modeled” the type of question and answer session which would be encountered in the competition. This was a vastly superior alternative to simply telling them how to change the presentation, despite being marginally less efficient perhaps. I believe it allowed them to take more pride in the work since it was still “their own”, prevented me from feeling guilty about micromanaging to the same extent, and it gave them experience having to think on their feet which is directly relevant for the competition.

Results

I am pleased to report that these alternative approaches bared promising results. The Fed Challenge team exhibited its best performance at the regional competition thus far. Despite losing one of our team members to a concussion just a couple days before the competition, they ended just two-points behind the winner from our bracket (Boston College) and 14-points above the lowest scoring team from our bracket (either Bates or Quinnipiac). It can't be overstated the disadvantage the loss of a team member presented, given that new lines were distributed to each member last minute and there was one less member to field questions which is quite crucial. Particularly impressive was the fact that their recommendation for the Fed (raising the interest rate on excess reserves by one-quarter of a percent) was actually precisely what the Fed undertook within roughly one month of the competition. Although this may sound rather trivial, being only a quarter of a percent, it was actually monumental in that it was the first time the Fed had raised interest rates in about seven years. I believe this reflects favorably on the high sophistication of the analysis the team provided, aligning with the ultimate deduction of Fed economists, and I am optimistic for future competitions.

My Econ 304 presentations also went quite well, and I received my highest evaluations to date in that, or any, course despite no deterioration in the rigor of the course as captured by the hours reported outside of class and the difficulty rating. As a slight tangent to this project, discussions in our meetings also led to my revamping the syllabus and testing structure of my Econ 302 course: Macroeconomic theory. Again my evaluations this year for that course were the highest I had received so far by a notable margin. My CTL fellows experience proved exceedingly beneficial.