

## Working Paper 008

### Applied Economic Research: Integration of Academia and the Workplace

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#### Abstract

Education literature suggests that the nature of a student's participation in workplace activities has a major impact on that student's knowledge acquisition. In order to maximize the potential of those activities for all stakeholders, hosting organizations are encouraged to develop mechanisms to optimize learning opportunities that will help workplace programs to be viewed as long-term human and social capital investments.

The nugget of our idea of an optimal learning mechanism is that the classroom walls are permeable. That is, classroom learning can support the internship experience, and the internship experience can support classroom learning. In our pilot program with the University of Sioux Falls, we brought economists from the American Institute for Economic Research (AIER) into the classroom and the university professor into the workplace.

This kind of collaborative arrangement between an academic institution and a practitioner is an innovative approach not only to improving undergraduate economic education but also to exposing students to the economic research process and substantiating the theoretical base they have established in prior courses. This exposure helps undergraduates to broaden their knowledge, gain practical experience, and become successful participants in the global workforce.

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## 1. Introduction

In the first decade of the 21st century we observed the changing nature of the workplace documented by many academic research papers and popular articles. For example, see Newman and Winston (2016), Christensen and Schneider (2010), Tripathi and Sharma (2011), and Trilling and Fadel (2009), among others. The labor market changes from manufacturing to service, global competition, and the need for constant re-tooling and learning new skills all call for alterations in the ways we prepare our students for future careers. The workplace itself is changing. More people are working remotely, telecommuting, and teleconferencing around the world. Working in teams, and particularly in teams of people with diverse sets of skills, backgrounds, and cultural competencies, will become even more prevalent in the coming years.

The focus of this paper is to discuss the value of practical experience in terms of work skills acquisition and the relationship of practical experience to the academic curriculum of applied economic research. As we showcase an innovative collaboration between a university economics class and an economic think tank, we argue that integration of academia and the workplace is beneficial to all parties involved.

The focal point of our idea is based on the education literature that postulates that experiential learning in the workplace is not just the opportunity to “apply” the material learned in the classroom, but it complements academic learning by developing life skills that are unique and highly transferable to any environment.

In our pilot program with the University of Sioux Falls, located in South Dakota, we brought the economists of the American Institute for Economic Research (AIER), located in Massachusetts, into the classroom and the university professor into the workplace. Based on the positive outcomes of the pilot, we are moving to the next stage of the project, where we will collaborate with several colleges and universities to bring applied economics to the classroom.

This paper is organized as follows. Part 2 presents the evidence from the literature about the value of practical experience. Part 3 summarizes the pilot project set-up; part 4 describes students’ learning outcomes; part 5 concludes.

## 2. The Value of Practical Experience

The seminal book by Moore (2013) presents a summary of the theoretical underpinnings and the history of the development of thought about the educational value of engaged learning. According to Moore (2013), the three pillars of the experiential learning approach are<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> Moore (2013): p. 101.

1. “Learning from Experience” introduced by Dewey (1938). Moore particularly cited Dewey’s focus on the importance of the interaction between the learner and the socially constructed environment.

We applied this theory to practice by involving students in the professional life of the institute. The research assignments dealt not only with economic content but also reflected the methodology and data analysis selected by AIER experts. The workflow schedule, the firm’s production deadlines, staff reassignments, and other workplace events were part of the everyday life the students were exposed to.

2. “Communities of Practice” introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). This idea postulates that learning is a function of active participation in the changing environment of the workplace.

“The communities of practice are groups of people who share a set of problems, or a passion about the topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”<sup>2</sup> Since all AIER researchers form a community of practice already, students were organically integrated into it. This arrangement allowed them to learn what the community of practice is and what kind of professional interaction goes on.

3. “Workplace Learning” described by Billet (2001), Fenwick (2003), and Raelin (2008). This pillar suggests that the constraints intrinsic to work organization impact students’ knowledge acquisition.

Even though the situated learning that occurred during our pilot program was specific to AIER’s organizational structure and research agenda, we took care to guide students through a reflection exercise at the end of the course. The goal was to help them formulate and articulate the skills and competencies they acquired during this experience.

Moore (2013) posits that the learning that occurs in the workplace is not an “application” of the concepts acquired in the classroom. The out-of-school environment requires different kinds of cognition, and thus the skills that are attained at the professional site are completely different from the skills developed in the academic setting. Table 1 summarizes the kinds of thinking that are required by a workplace setting presented by Moore (2013).

The value of practical experience is, then, in the additional cognitive abilities being developed. What about the skills that are being acquired in the workplace? Are they different from the ones that can be attained in the classroom?

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<sup>2</sup> Wenger et al (1998), p.4.

**Table 1. Kinds of Cognition Required by a Workplace Setting.**  
**[Adapted from Moore (2013), p. 70.]**

<i>Kind of cognition</i>	<i>Comparison with school setting</i>
1. Problem formation	Workers define as well as solve problems; in school, teachers define and students solve problems.
2. Flexible modes of solution	Workers employ diverse approaches to solving a problem; schools demand standardized or algorithmic solution procedures.
3. Using the environment	People in real-world situations incorporate elements of the task environment into the problem-solving system; environment is not simply the arena within which the problem is solved but becomes part of the tool set for that solution.
4. Effort-saving	People in the real world try to expend as little mental and physical energy as they can in solving a problem; the more mandatory procedures in school attend far less to effort.
5. Forms of representation	People at work represent their problems in a variety of ways fitted to the occasion; school-based thought is essentially symbolic.
6. Cognitive teamwork	Thinking is distributed across members of a team; in school the cognitive work more often has to be performed by an individual.

The support of new learning goals and workplace environment in the 21st century is presented in Newman and Winston (2016) and Trilling and Fadel (2009). Both books argue that because the dynamics of the workplace call for teamwork, flexibility, and situated learning, the skills that are required in the practical world are unlike the skills and competencies attained in the classroom. Trilling and Fadel (2009) suggested that there are three groups of skills that are necessary for functioning well in the 21st century: (1) learning and innovation, (2) digital literacy, and (3) career and life skills. These skills are part of a unified, collective vision for 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning that was developed by The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Skills.

For learning and innovation skills, the literature mentions critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, and creativity and innovation. In experience-based education, the practice of critical thinking assumes a form different from the academic setting. Critical thinking in the workplace advocates action, the preparation of well-articulated ideas, and the efficient delivery of those ideas to others.

For digital literacy skills, Trilling and Fadel (2009) discuss information literacy, media literacy, and information and communication technology (ICT) literacy. The increased demand for the

ability to access information efficiently and effectively, evaluate information critically and competently, and use information accurately and creatively calls for informational literacy and fluency. Media literacy is described as the ability of students and employees to competently operate using various delivery methods (print, graphics, animation, audio, video, websites, etc.). ICT literacy calls for the ability to use technology as a tool to research, organize, evaluate, and communicate information and to use digital technologies appropriately and ethically.

For career and life skills, the literature mentions flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural interaction, productivity and accountability, and leadership and responsibility. In addition, the work environment develops the concept of self and identity, such as an understanding of what it means to “be” an economist, for example.

So, the cognition and skills developed in the workplace are unique. Moore (2013) argues that under the right conditions the two forms of knowledge (academic and experiential) could be compatible, complementary, and mutually expansive. The potential for the workplace adding value to the school’s curriculum and vice versa is a matter of pedagogy, teaching practices, and institutional missions.<sup>3</sup>

The cognition and skills acquired in the workplace appear to be universal, meaning that they apply to any field of study. We wanted to know if something distinct is happening in economics as a field of study and as a profession in terms of students’ engagement. We turned to the economic education literature. The Allgood, Walstad, and Siegfried (2015) seminal paper summarizes the methods of teaching economics to undergraduate students and provides an opportunity to assess which methods are proved to be most beneficial to students in the academy. For example, cooperative learning, experiments, and classroom and online discussions are all identified as the pedagogies that stimulate engaged learning and provide positive outcomes. Even though this article does not provide recommendations about the collaboration of academic institutions with professional sites in order to support the development of career and life skills, we took to heart the conclusion that engaged learning is most beneficial to student achievement.

In addition to engaged learning, the assessment of innovative structures of capstone courses in economics provided the foundation for our approach. For example, Li and Simonson (2016) describe the set-up and the outcomes of a senior research course in economics in a public university. They conclude that the redesign of the course to provide the overview of the scientific research process showed positive effects on students’ learning outcomes and on their satisfaction with the course and the program. We wanted to go a step further and involve students in the actual scientific research process happening in an economic think tank.

With all this information in hand, we embarked on the conceived project. The main goal of this project was to bridge the two knowledge domains in which students operate: the academic classroom and the workplace. By using the theoretical underpinnings of engaged learning and

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<sup>3</sup> Moore (2013): p. 99.

the curriculum of experience and by applying experiential pedagogy, we integrated the university classroom with the professional environment. Since AIER is an economic think tank, it is focused on providing value-added to students studying or intending to study economics, or to those who are studying related disciplines such as business, finance, accounting, or entrepreneurship. During the project, we made every effort to devise opportunities for students to debrief their experience in this course in ways that would highlight possible synergies between academia and the real world and possible transfers of knowledge, competencies, and skills to their future careers.

The next section describes this pilot project conducted in fall 2014. We brought AIER economists into the classroom and students of economics, along with their professor, into the workplace.

### **3. Pilot-Project Summary**

The “Applied Economic Research” course at the University of Sioux Falls (USF) in South Dakota was offered in fall 2014 as a unique opportunity to learn economic research tools from real-life experts. Using topics predetermined by AIER, students developed research proposals, designed a research plan, compiled data, and wrote a complete academic paper.

This pilot project included two courses. Initially, students began with an applied economic research class at USF that was moderated by both the researchers at AIER and their professor. For the second course, students and their professor came to the AIER campus to finish research projects they began in class during the prior semester. When students arrived at AIER in Great Barrington, Mass., they not only extended their knowledge of economics and methodology, but they also learned about the intricacies of the economic think tank’s everyday operations.

#### **3.1 Syllabus**

The construction of the syllabus was a collaborative effort between AIER and USF. The research team at AIER refined the research topics that would be used and assisted in the selection of a text for the course. At USF, the timeline for the course was developed to space deliverables throughout the course as evenly as possible and to set the necessary deadlines to guide student progress. This timeline was developed in close consultation with AIER researchers, as they would be providing verbal and written feedback to the students.

Prior to this collaboration, there was no course at USF that met these specific objectives. In the interest of getting the initial pilot up and running by the fall term of 2014, the research course was offered as a special topics course. Within the USF course catalog, most disciplines have an approved course code that can be used to develop a new course around a special topic. In some cases, these courses are expected to be offered once or twice only; in other cases, it is a way of developing, offering, and testing a course idea before it becomes a permanent part of the course catalog. The second half of the collaboration, specifically the trip to Great Barrington to work side by side with AIER researchers, was developed as a research practicum and underwent

a full review by the Academic Policies Committee of the USF Faculty Association and, upon its recommendation, was adopted by a full vote of the association.

### **3.2 Topics Selection**

The projects were designed to support ongoing AIER research and were distilled into focused projects that could be accomplished with a semester-long course.

Team A was assigned the following research question: In which industries and occupations has unemployment been most entrenched following the Great Recession? This team was provided with a list of industries and occupations and asked to determine which saw the highest unemployment and which were impacted for the longest duration. This group was asked to compare these results for 2008-2009 with the recession and recovery of 2001.

Team B was assigned a different research question. They were asked to monitor the allocation of health-care dollars by conducting a state-by-state analysis of health-care outcomes and expenditures. This team was requested to specifically focus on the outcomes of “life expectancy” and “infant mortality,” and the expenditures they were assigned were “average employer-sponsored, health-insurance premiums” and “average private-market insurance premiums.”

### **3.3 Class Management**

The day-to-day management of the course and course activities was done by the professor at USF as would be the case in any traditional course offering. That included the creation of student teams, the division of labor for the project, and ongoing monitoring of the project.

#### Creating Student Teams

In the initial pilot, students were divided into the two teams defined above. To begin this process, both topics were reviewed thoroughly in class. At the end of that class session, students were asked to select their first choice and offer a compelling justification for why they should be assigned to that topic. Here the goal was to understand where the students’ passions and interests were relative to the topics available. The belief was, and still is, that if students feel a personal connection to the project they will be more engaged and ultimately will deliver a better end-product.

Much to the surprise of the professor, most students did not have a strong preference. However, two examples are offered here to demonstrate the success of this approach. First, one of the students in the course was running for statewide election in fall 2014. He had a strong preference for the project on health care, as he believed issues of Medicaid expansion might be brought to the state legislature that year. A second student had a strong preference for the project on long-term unemployment. His mother lost her job in the recession and he had felt the impact first-hand.

With information on preferences in hand, teams were assigned to balance skills and abilities. Because USF is a small university, the faculty know the students well and, in this case, each student in the course had been in a prior course with the professor. When the teams were balanced, each team was given a student who had a demonstrated aptitude for quantitative analysis as well as a student who was known to have strong writing skills. The remainder of the team members were assigned to even critical thinking skills and general academic performance.

### Support from Practitioners

This pilot was designed to connect students directly with practitioners and provide them with access to professional resources and specific guidance. AIER researchers assisted the students in:

- the use of professional, current resources to pose a valid research problem and question;
- the identification of an appropriate methodology;
- conducting systematic research to investigate a problem;
- composing their conclusions and recommendations in a professional paper.

### Coordination and Feedback

Interaction between the students at USF and the researchers at AIER was conducted through WebEx discussions, email exchanges, and written feedback as sections of the paper were completed. In the initial WebEx session, students met virtually with the researchers and heard about the projects from them. This also allowed the students to hear how the work they would do in the first semester would fit into a larger research project and to get a sense of the work that they might expect when they traveled to AIER to work side by side with the researchers in the second course.

During the initial WebEx session, students were empowered to contact the researchers via e-mail as needed. The intention was to prevent students from getting stalled and to minimize the links in the communication chain. This proved to be a challenge for students. There was a hesitation to reach out in the initial stages as the students did not want to be a burden or expose any lack of knowledge on their part. Over the course of the semester, students built a comfort level with their researchers, and this served as a good foundation for the second course that was conducted on-site at the AIER campus.

As sections of the student papers were developed, the practitioners provided detailed, high quality written feedback. This was particularly valuable as students could review, reread, and thoroughly digest the comments as they were making the related modifications to their papers.

### Staff Changes at the Site

Shortly after the course began, one of the practitioners assigned to Team A left AIER. While this was not anticipated and added some challenges to the management of that research project, it



was a valuable learning opportunity for the students involved. They were in possession of resources from a practitioner who was no longer available to answer questions. The professor reinforced for students the need to document each step in the process so that a project could be picked up by a new teammate should the need arise. Additionally, students saw the fluidity that exists within organizations. A new AIER supervisor, of course, was assigned to this team, and the project continued. However, students had to get used to the new management and communication style as well as a slight shift in the analysis direction. In hindsight, this was a unique learning experience. In fact, this incident was reflected on a lot by students at the end of the course.

### **3.4 Off-Campus/On-Site Extension**

A unique feature of this applied economic research program is an on-site extension during the winter intersession. Even though it is unrealistic to expect 100 percent participation in the off-campus study, the students who did come to AIER enjoyed the experience and learned even more. To make the travel portion of the course meaningful, the course was registered as a study-away class. The professor acted not only as a chaperone but also as a manager of the group, mentor, and conflict resolution officer.

In the week before the students traveled to AIER to begin their work, their professor outlined explicitly the deliverables and academic expectations for this course. Students were required to keep a daily journal that specifically addressed their activities, new insights gained, areas of question or concern, and observations about the functioning of an economic think tank and the work of a researcher. Students were also informed that they would be required to create a portfolio on their return that would include a full list of references and sources accessed in their work, samples of their work, and a reflection on personal learning objectives.

In addition to their professor outlining the expectations of the course, during the preparatory week students were provided research materials to further advance their understanding of the research questions they would be investigating. These articles were discussed as a group prior to departure.

During the AIER in-residence portion of the program we employed the pedagogy of experience described by Moore (2013), which is based on the premise that “people and systems learn things when they engage in activities that entail the use of (attention to, apprehension of, application and transformation of) knowledge about those things...”<sup>4</sup>

Since the collaborative connections were formed during the semester prior to the on-campus visit, the students who arrived in Great Barrington were ready to dive into the research right away. In fact, they were so intertwined with the project that they became part of the AIER research team. This allowed for complete integration of the class syllabus and the think-tank research agenda. In addition to hard skills of economic analysis, students were dealing with

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

“presenting an idea to the supervisor,” “navigating the nuances of a professional office,” and “managing their time and independence,” as well as understanding the notion of a “business casual” dress code and adapting to an unfamiliar environment in an unfamiliar place.

Students also extended their framework of tasks. They did not just perform isolated tasks unrelated to one another. Throughout their time on campus they developed an understanding about the ways their effort contributed to the output of the team and the ways the experienced economists organized their work and resources.

#### **4. Students’ Learning Outcomes**

Two assignments were developed at the end of the course to ascertain what the learning outcomes had been for the students. While both the professor at USF and the AIER education director had ideas about potential outcomes, this qualitative review provided insights beyond those expectations.

The first assignment from which outcome data was extracted was research presentations. On completion of their final papers and while those papers were being reviewed by AIER researchers, students developed a professional presentation to share their findings with other faculty at USF as well as the team of researchers at AIER. As part of the presentation, each student was asked to address what the specific learning outcomes had been for him/her as well as challenges faced by the group. The students were asked to think beyond the topic that was researched and identify issues and outcomes that could impact other academic or professional situations.

The final deliverable for the initial research course was to write a reflection paper. Here students were asked to assess their contribution to the project, and again, identify challenges and speak directly to what they individually learned in the course.

These assignments were open ended, and the groupings below reflect general themes that were identified by the students. As the data in Table 2 show, there was considerable agreement among the students about what the outcomes of the course had been, with more than 85 percent of students indicating that they advanced their data management skills using Excel. Specifically, they identified as a key learning outcome their ability to visually display data using Excel graphs.

That same percentage of the students (85.7 percent) identified the value of working in teams. This outcome was a strong theme in their final presentations, where some students highlighted the challenges of managing different work, class, and practice schedules. They shared experiences about differing expectations on standards for work quality among their peers and commitments to meeting times outside of class. Other students named teammates specifically and spoke of the value that person brought to the group.

**Table 2. Applied Economic Research Course Pilot Results: Learning Outcomes**

<b>Learning outcomes</b>	<b>Students who identified this outcome as valuable, %</b>
Advanced Excel skills/graphing	85.7
Working in groups	85.7
Learning to analyze data	57.1
Researching data sets	57.1
Understanding of the topic at hand	42.8
Attention to detail	42.9
Organizing data, maintaining spreadsheets	42.9
APA/citations/professional writing	28.6

*Source:* Students' reaction papers and final presentations

While Table 2 addresses broad themes, the students provided more detailed examples to further illustrate what was learned. Team A, looking at long-term unemployment, was managing a very large data file. After completing their computations on unemployment rates, they deleted their original data only to find out they had completed the calculation incorrectly. In the initial WebEx meeting with AIER researchers, the students had been told explicitly to never delete their data, and the researchers provided specific advice on sourcing information so it could be retrieved again. Having to go back and rebuild their data file was a monumental task, and all in that group spoke about the understanding they now have about preserving data.

The challenges identified by the students have been summarized in Table 3. As might be expected, the most frequently identified challenge was finding the necessary data. This result is not surprising in a course of this nature. More than half of the students, however, also identified the challenge of working with such a large data file. This issue arose for the group that was looking at long-term unemployment. Their original decision to pull data monthly was done to ensure maximum flexibility for the analysis. While this did prove to be the case, it produced additional challenges for managing and displaying their findings.

What was perhaps more surprising was that 71.4 percent of the students identified time management and scheduling as one of their challenges. While the course was structured in such a way that deliverables were paced throughout the semester, that those deliverables could not be completed alone and in the hours immediately before they were due meant that students had to manage their time and scheduling differently. This corresponds to the learning outcomes in Table 2, where students identified that they had learned additional skills and abilities in working as a group.

**Table 3. Applied Economic Research Course Pilot Results: Challenges**

<b>Challenging tasks</b>	<b>Students who mentioned this challenge, %</b>
Finding data	85.7
Time management/scheduling	71.4
Too much data	57.1
Unused information/data	42.9
Literature review	14.3
Freedom/limited structure	14.3

*Source:* Students' reaction papers and final presentations

For Team A, the scope of the topic was narrowed after they pulled all their data. Their original research question called for them to examine a list of both industries and occupations. After a time it was determined that the scope of the project was too large, and it was narrowed to industries only. To the students, not using the data they had collected on occupations meant that they had wasted their time. The students struggled with this for the entire semester. In both their presentations and their reflection papers they again lamented not being able to use all their information and data.

While only 14.3 percent of the students named the literature review as a challenge, this was identified by the professor and the team at AIER as a significant challenge for most students. A sampling of the comments on the literature review include:

- "I had never done a literature review and was very unfamiliar with the content and format."
- "We felt like deer in the headlights!"
- "I was what one could call clueless..."

While the students had experience reading published research studies, they struggled with the concept of a literature review. They were more accustomed to using journal articles to substantiate their points in a paper. Looking through the research to guide their study and looking for gaps in the research was a struggle. This is closely tied to the challenge of freedom and limited structure. By design, the course was not distilled to the clean and precise academic case studies to which the students had become accustomed.

As for the outcomes of the on-site/off-campus portion of the program, the students cited the novelty of being in the office and interacting with experts throughout the workday as well as the acquisition of skills using certain software, concise writing, and participation in the firm's life.

- “Having experience working in an office and using Excel was very helpful. I found it easier to communicate because I molded those skills with AIER. Often, I had to work with other people or teams of people for various projects,” said one student.
- “Basically, I think this class was a good opportunity to get a feel for when it’s appropriate to ask for help... It’s important to push yourself to be an independent learner, but it’s also good to know when to rely on others to help you learn. So, to summarize, working with AIER allowed me to learn how to learn, if that makes sense,” wrote another.

In terms of soft skills, students reported that they learned to be confident, independent thinkers. They learned to be able to self-guide their research progress and communicate and defend their arguments and results to the experts. They learned to be able to observe nuances of the office and understand the “rules of the game.” These reflections are awesome!

#### **4. Conclusions**

As the literature well documents, changes in the labor market, combined with global competition, require a change in how human capital is developed. As such, by breaking down the walls between classrooms and the institutions that will employ these graduates, we expose students to workplace practices and actively engage them in the learning process. The hands-on nature of these projects forced students to be flexible as they experienced challenges working in groups, adjustments to the scope of their projects, or changes in the research staff supporting their work.

It is well understood that the skills needed in young graduates today are not likely to be the skills that will carry with them for their entire careers. Partnerships such as this that provide opportunities for problem solving, communication, and collaboration develop a foundation for skills that are transferable and are to be fostered. Beyond the application of economic theories, students gained an understanding of research methodologies, proficiency in digital literacy, and advanced skills in data management and analysis.

This paper describes the pilot project undertaken by the American Institute for Economic Research located in Massachusetts and the University of Sioux Falls located in South Dakota. The positive learning outcomes documented in the paper propelled us to experiment with this integrated approach further. We are planning to increase the number of schools and students involved in the project for fall 2016 and to focus the research program pertaining to this class. To avoid over-extending practitioners’ supervisory time, we are planning to streamline the project management efforts, which will further enhance students’ engagement experience.

The students in university classrooms today are the employees and researchers of the next decade. By investing time to develop partnerships between academic institutions and practitioners, we are integrating the academy and the workplace, broadening the pool of potential employees, and striving to advance economic research capabilities throughout the country.

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