Let us start with an observation. We (i.e., economics professors, particularly those of us who teach undergraduates) spend a lot of time writing on the blackboard and lecturing (“chalk and talk”) (Watts and Becker 2005), probably more than most of our colleagues in other disciplines (Allgood, Bosshardt, van der Klaauw and Watts 2004). To this observation, let us add an assumption. Let us assume that our students are not learning and retaining what we believe they ought to. As with all decent assumptions, our assumption is not groundless, particularly at the principles level (Walstad and Allgood 1999).

You might well believe that there is a connection between our observation and our assumed state of the world. You might even believe that there is a causal relation, in particular you believe that chalk and talk is an ineffective way of imparting economic knowledge to a large proportion of our students. Now, let us make an additional assumption, namely that student outcomes enter (positively) into your utility function. If you have followed me this far, you might then reach the conclusion that it would be a desirable state of affairs if more of us experimented with alternatives to chalk and talk, most of these alternatives falling into the “active learning” methods catch-all. You might even reach the conclusion that you ought to experiment with these so-called active learning methods of instruction. Not so fast.

Notwithstanding any benefits outside of student outcomes that either you or your students might garner from a decrease in chalk and talk, in order to reach this conclusion, it ought to be the case that you have a reasonable expectation that these alternative methods will improve student outcomes.1 Unfortunately, with a few exceptions (e.g., Chizmar and Ostrosky’s (1998) study of the one-minute paper), support for the hypothesis that these meth-
ods improve student outcomes is largely anecdotal with few compelling statistical studies (Becker 2004, page 266).

Of course, some may argue that the economics profession does not let a lack of solid empirical support stand in the way of a good theory. More charitably, perhaps your priors on the effectiveness of active learning methods are sufficiently strong to overcome this lack of statistically compelling evidence. You might still resist the urge to experiment with these methods based on some cost-benefit calculation (one of those concepts our principles students are apparently not mastering). First there are the opportunity costs associated with methods that, in general, require precious class time. After all, chalk and talk is an efficient method for covering mounds of material in one 75-minute class meeting, bested only perhaps by its cousin, “Powerpoint and talk.” Also, you may believe that that you have become a reasonably competent lecturer, and worry that students may suffer through a rough but well intentioned active learning exercise when they could be enjoying a polished, if not a little stale, lecture. Opportunity costs aside, there are surely direct preparation costs associated with incorporating these methods into our arsenal. And what would become of that file cabinet full of lecture notes? (Not that we are falling prey to the sunk-cost fallacy, another one of those concepts our principles students are apparently not mastering.)

**Teaching Economics: More Alternatives to Chalk and Talk** (*TE*) joins a growing list of volumes aimed at reducing the costs of adopting active learning methods in the economics classroom, including William Becker and Watt’s *Teaching Economics to Undergraduates: Alternatives to Chalk and Talk* (1998) (*TEU*), to which *TE* is a sequel. In it you will find 11 well-written essays detailing steps you can take to implement active learning methods in your classroom. Some chapters (Denise Hazlett on classroom experiments; Robin Bartlett’s treatment of cooperative learning; John Carlson and Ann Velenchik on the case method; Kim Sosin and William Goffe on integrating technology; Stephen Buckles and Gail Hoyt on active learning in large classes; and Michael Watts on term papers and presentations) focus on methods that can complement or substitute for chalk and talk. Other chapters (Peter Kennedy on the content of the macroeconomics principles course; William Becker and William Greene on using Nobel laureates and quantitative methods) focus on the content. Avinash Dixit’s chapter on game theory is a mixture of method and content. Finally, there are special topics: Martin Shanahan and George Bredon on distance learning; and William Walstad’s chapter on assessment methods.

As evidenced by the number of stickies dangling from the reviewer’s copy, this book is crammed with useful ideas which can be implemented in a variety of courses. Chapters vary in level of detail, probably appropriately. Whereas Watts presents a very detailed analysis of a particular exercise, Sosin and Goffe, faced with the unenviable task of treating

*Onion* jokes about students blackmailing assistant professors (The Onion 2006), the incentives might well be relevant.

2Opportunity cost is probably another one of those fundamental concepts our students are not mastering. We probably ought not be too hard on our students for not mastering this concept, however, as apparently we have trouble with it as well (Ferraro and Taylor 2005).

3Is it the case that lecturing is like driving in that a majority believe themselves better than the median?
all things technology, opt for a series of potential uses. Each chapter includes a bulleted list of “Do’s and Don’ts,” which are generally helpful, although sometimes bordering on the bleeding obvious.

This reviewer encourages you to start with Buckles and Hoyt’s essay, which offers a very strong introduction to active learning methods. Once you have dog-eared, highlighted or otherwise marked numerous ideas, please return to their list of “Do’s and Don’ts.” In particular, select the activity appropriate for the learning goal and start small. Bleeding obvious? Yes. Will this reviewer admit to violating the latter piece of advice? Yes.

While you can easily integrate some ideas in Bartlett’s chapter on cooperative learning into your current course structure, it appears as though cooperative learning may be a method best implemented wholesale. Briefly, and certainly incompletely, in cooperative learning students are partitioned into (generally permanent) groups, given well-defined tasks for which each student in the group will have a well-defined role, and each student is responsible not only for their own learning, but also for that of the other members of the group. While this might not seem radical, consider that everyone in the group gets the grade earned by a randomly selected group member. As a wholesale change in classroom organization, the hurdles cooperative learning faces are high. First, anecdotal evidence is likely insufficient to induce most into making such a large change. In fact, Bartlett makes a strong case that cooperative learning can in fact improve outcomes, citing quite a few studies. Second, it is quickly clear that cooperative learning is a radical departure from traditional methods of instruction, and adoptees will likely require significant guidance. Bartlett appears quite cognizant that this guidance cannot be given in twenty pages, and thus provides numerous cites for the reader interested in more information. Although this reviewer is not yet ready to take the cooperative learning plunge, Bartlett presents the most compelling vision of what an active learning course could be, a vision made even more convincing by empirical evidence of efficacy. If you have serious time constraints and a tenuous attachment to the status quo, you are advised to read this chapter at your own peril.

This reviewer recommends Watts’ wonderful chapter on group papers and presentations to those interested in incorporating this particular cooperative learning activity. In it, Watts distills over a decade of experience into a concise and well-written chapter on how to effectively design this activity appropriate for most upper level courses. By providing the evolution of his techniques, it is easy to see both the common problems and how his framework addresses them. For example, to combat the inattention classmates initially gave student presentations, Watts now requires that each group distribute to the class three multiple-choice questions answered in the presentation, a subset of which Watts puts on the final examination.

The authors in the volume nearly unanimously acknowledge that the introduction of active learning activities takes class time. For example, the group presentations in Watts’ course require two-and-a-half weeks. Thus, if you are planning on introducing these activities into your classroom, be prepared to pay the opportunity cost of dropped topics.
What if dropping topics is not a net cost? In what is the most provocative chapter, at least for the reader already sold on active learning methods, Kennedy argues exactly that: less is more (a concept not usually taught in the principles class), at the very least for the principles courses. His views on the current organization of macroeconomics principles course are admittedly not novel and translate easily to microeconomics. He generalizes, probably fairly, that most principles courses are structured, at least implicitly, to prepare students for the intermediate course. In practice, this means plenty of graphs and technical details, and the coverage of a wide range of phenomena, terminology, and institutional details. He proposes instead (page 89) that the goal of the macroeconomics principles course ought to be to “ensure that students remember a small number of important macroeconomic concepts, and know how these concepts can be used to make sense of the macroeconomics they are likely to encounter after leaving school,” and proposes a “short list” of topics. He responds to a number of defenses of the status quo. Absent from his list is the idea that perhaps we do not want to risk the disappointment of students who go on to the intermediate level only to find a reliance on technical details, algebra, and calculus and a lack of the “story telling” he advocates for the principles class. I imagine that he would respond that a student sold on economics might well be willing to pay this price, and her understanding of the story might actually enable her translate it into the math.

At one level, Kennedy’s chapter does not fit neatly into this volume, as there is a distinct lack of nifty, in-class, active learning exercises. Upon further review, the views of Kennedy and others are integral to the active learning “program.” As surely as less may be more at the principles level, it may well be more at the undergraduate elective level as well. To those who are disposed to experiment with active learning buy fret about the in-class time required, this reviewer encourages you to critically look at your current syllabus. For this reviewer, it was a somewhat uncomfortable experience to ask which topics in his current syllabus are truly necessary for a good understanding of the important themes in modern Industrial Organization.

While this is a fine volume, the prospective buyer ought to bear in mind a few qualifications. First, as previously noted, TE is but one of a number of volumes offering practical advice on the implementation of active learning methods in the economics classroom. In particular, the editors note that this volume is a sequel to TEU. In truth, the delta from the previous book might well be too small to warrant a place next to it on the bookshelf. Six of the chapters cover topics previously addressed in TEU. The editors believe these six chapters complement rather than substitute for their previous edition counterparts. With the exception of the contributions of Watts and Becker and Greene, this reviewer disagrees. Also, the Journal of Economic Education published “abridged” versions of three of the chapters (Dixit; Sosin and Goffe; Becker and Greene) in its Summer 2005 edition. This reviewer would modify abridged with slightly. The bodies of the contributions from Dixit and Becker and Green are largely verbatim, although the editors of TE dropped Dixit’s admittedly shameless pitch for his textbook.

Perhaps you have noted that the sequel drops Undergraduates from the title. Were you to infer an increased focus on implementing active learning methods in the graduate classroom,
you would be mistaken. While many of the ideas and techniques in both volumes are applicable to the graduate classroom, the undergraduate economics experience remains the focus of the essays in *TE*.

Finally, *TE* inherits what this reviewer perceives to be a general problem of edited volumes, namely a lack of cohesion. For example, no fewer than three of the essays recommend the one-minute paper, and if you are interested in running experiments in your classroom, you may want to look at parts of no fewer than five chapters, four of which include the url for Charles Holt’s collection of online experiments. True, at 225 pages inclusive, placing this volume in your reading queue will not set you back many *AER* articles. However, this does not stop this reviewer from imagining the 150 pages this volume could have been.

While it may already be obvious, this reviewer is one of those with sufficiently high priors on the effectiveness of active learning methods. He is part of a small but growing minority of economists who employ these techniques. “Chalk and talk” is still the dominant teaching style (Watts and Becker 2005). From this perspective, this reviewer recommends the addition of *TE* to the bookshelf of anyone interested in incorporating active learning methods in the economics classroom, as well as those who have taken the plunge without the benefit of a similar volume. To those still uncertain about this whole active learning agenda, he can make no stronger statement than the editors (page xi), “We believe that it is striking that there are few, if any, documented cases of economists who have started using these approaches but then go back to a life of pure chalk and talk, or of their students objecting to less chalk and talk in the classroom.”
References


