DOI 10.5281/twist.10049652#614

TWIST, 2026, Vol. 21, Issue 3, pp. 37-44

TWIST

Journal homepage: www.twistjournal.net

Active Learning Strategies to Illustrate the Real-World Relevance of Complex Economics Theories and Concepts

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Abstract
This paper advances the use of the Active Learning approach to create a learning environment that exposes Economics students to material and experiences that help them see the relevance of Economics concepts and theories in the real world. A teaching and learning environment that creates opportunities for students to see the relevance and application of subject content in everyday life can enrich their understanding of the subject and improve student achievement. This study aimed to address the following research questions: "Why is it challenging for students to perceive the relevance of Economics concepts and theories taught in the subject? Which pedagogic approach can teachers adopt to create meaningful experiences that illustrate the real-world relevance of Economics concepts and theories?" The research employed a Constructivist theoretical framework as a lens to interpret the data generated. Participatory Action Research was used as the methodology to generate data, which were then analysed using the Thematic Analysis technique. The study found that Economics concepts are abstract, and that students thus find it difficult to perceive their real-world relevance and application. The predominant lecture and theoretical approach used in the teaching of Economics was found to be a contributory factor in the problem. In addition, the study found that Active Learning strategies create a learning environment that bridges the gap between classroom theory and real-world practice, which illuminates the everyday relevance and application of the subject's concepts and theories.

Keywords
economics, real-world relevance, meaningful learning, active learning, case studies

INTRODUCTION

The subject of Economics is taught at both high school and tertiary levels. Ismail et al. (2020) explain that this subject aims to equip students with critical and creative thinking skills, as well as knowledge that will enable them to make informed, rational economic decisions daily. However, Serbo and Ancho (2019) note that Economics comprises technical concepts and theories that appear unrelated or inapplicable to students' everyday lives, which often results in them being unable to connect subject content to the realities of the world. For example, Kuswanto (2020) contends that students' significant difficulty in understanding Microeconomics concepts stems from the theoretical nature of the subject matter, which does not seem relevant to students' real lives. Peach (2023) seems to concur with this observation, arguing that many Economics students struggle with the subject's theory due to its abstract nature.

It is against this background that the following problem statement is formulated for the study: "Economics teachers often encounter the challenge of how to teach in a way that creates learning experiences that illustrate the real-world relevance of the complex concepts and theories of Economics to students, who usually struggle to see their relevance and application to everyday life." For example, Rosales and Journell (2012) explain that Economics teachers face the challenge of how to teach this subject, which students often find has little real application or relevance to their lives. This paper thus aims to answer the following research questions: "Why is it challenging for students to perceive the relevance of Economics concepts and theories taught in the subject? Which pedagogic approach can teachers adopt to create meaningful experiences that illustrate the real-world relevance of Economics concepts and theories?"

A factor that appears to contribute to students' inability to relate to Economics concepts and theories is the way the subject is taught. Picault (2019:1) explains that the traditional lecture method, also known as the chalk-and-talk method, is predominantly used in teaching Economics, and that with this approach, teachers mainly focus on imparting conceptual knowledge to students. The teaching of the subject using this method is often more theoretical and textbook-driven. Mearman et al. (2014) contend that presenting Economics in an abstract, theoretical way, where the complexities of the subject are confusing, may be frustrating for students, especially if they are unable to identify the relevance of the information. For example, Farias and Balardini (2018) note that textbook discussions of the concept of Market Structure are often hypothetical and rarely include current observable phenomena. They argue that for this concept to be relevant and meaningful, students should be able to relate discussions on the Market Model to the real world. Peach (2023) maintains that if teaching of the subject is not in a context in which economic issues arise, the subject will likely seem unreal to students. It is therefore imperative that alternative methods be found and applied in Economics teaching. This argument appears to correspond with Farias and Balardini's (2018) assertion that to improve the relevance of Economics to students, the teaching of this subject should move past the chalk-and-talk approach, and teachers should be open to different methods of teaching the subject, which can assist in illuminating complex Economics phenomena.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The abstract and theoretical nature of Economics, and student difficulties in perceiving the real-life relevance of its concepts and theories

Ng and Karjanto (2023) note the difficulty of perceiving the real-life relevance of the concepts and theories of the subject of Economics, identifying the theoretical, highly abstract nature of the concepts taught in this subject as a challenge that hampers students' ability to see their value in and relevance to the real world. Similarly, Li (2019) asserts that some principles and formulas in Economics place strong emphasis on abstraction, which makes them difficult for students to understand. Behal (2024) states that despite Economics being a subject rooted in real-world events, human behaviour, and policymaking, most students taking the subject find it difficult to see the relevance of the abstract Economics theories and models in everyday life. This challenge can also be inferred from Picault's (2019) argument that many students struggle to connect conceptual and theoretical knowledge with the real world, and, as a result, they feel that the lessons presented lack practical application. The same challenge is noted by Depro (2022), who states that many students in undergraduate Economics classes do not perceive the introductory courses as relevant to their everyday lives, and they believe that the subject's teaching does not integrate relatable examples. This challenge prevents students from gaining a deep understanding of the subject, and, as a result, their interest and engagement wane, as they struggle to connect with the content. Students' interest and motivation in the subject may be compromised when they do not see how the subject's knowledge is relevant and beneficial to them. As a result, their interest and motivation to learn the subject, as well as their performance, are negatively affected. Peach (2023) explains that significant time is devoted to teaching Economics theory, but the risk is that by focusing on theory, Economics may be divorced from the human condition. In addition, Peach (2023) notes that if teaching of the subject does not take into account the context in which economic issues occur, the likelihood is that the subject will appear unreal to students. As a result, the subject becomes more of an intellectual exercise that lacks connection and relevance to the world outside the classroom.

The dominant approach in teaching Economics

The literature on Economics education highlights the theoretical way in which the subject is generally taught, and it further suggests that the teaching of Economics leans towards a traditional lecture, or chalk-and-talk, approach, which is more content-oriented, textbook-based, and classroom-bound. Zhang et al. (2020) explain that the main teaching method employed in Economics is a theoretical approach, intended to help students grasp the basic principles of Economics. However, this approach seems limited in creating opportunities for students to see the everyday relevance of the subject matter and understand its connection to the real world. Patir (2020) maintains that one notable limitation of the conventional lecture method is that it emphasises theory at the expense of practical and real-world situations. In this way, meaningful learning can be hindered, as students may end up merely accumulating facts, theories, and concepts from the subject that they cannot relate to or apply. Meaningful learning, according to Kristidhika et al. (2020), occurs when the concepts and theories that students learn are related to what they already know and they can see the meaning and connection of these concepts and theories to their everyday lives.

Active Learning as an alternative pedagogy in teaching Economics

Active Learning is recommended as a pedagogical approach with the potential to help Economics teachers teach the subject in ways that make it relevant to students' everyday lives. For example, Behal (2024), who observes that Economics students often struggle to see the relevance of abstract Economics theories and models in everyday life, suggests that the pedagogy of Active Learning may be beneficial, as it creates opportunities for students to engage with the material in more practical ways. Dzaiy and Abdullah (2024) define Active Learning as any learner-centred strategy characterised by learner participation and engagement in the learning process, using authentic activities that require them to think and act rather than passively receive information. Similarly, Ludwiczak (2025) describes Active Learning as a pedagogy based on a range of activities that engage students in doing and thinking about what they are doing. Learner engagement and participation in the learning process seem to be central principles of the pedagogy of Active Learning, as they can help learners relate to and make connections with what they are learning. Millson and Oxendine (2020) argue that when presenting lessons, teachers must relate the lesson material to students, and that when students can relate to the material taught, they will find value in learning and in applying their knowledge in life. Active Learning thus appears to be a relevant pedagogy for achieving the goal of relating subject matter to students. This is confirmed by Surakarn et al.

(2020), who argue that Active Learning techniques aim to assist students in making relevant connections with course material, and in transforming opaque ideas into concepts they can integrate into their knowledge base. Shroff et al. (2021) maintain that deep learning occurs when students are active participants in their own knowledge construction, as they can make meaning of what they learn by engaging in higher-order skills, such as questioning, justifying, and drawing conclusions.

ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES

The Case Study Method

Chulkov and Nizovtsev (2013) explain that the Case Study Method is recommended as a strategy to improve student engagement, motivation, and learning in Economics classes. Similarly, Li (2019) proposes the Case Study Method as a strategy that can help put abstract knowledge into specific teaching situations, enabling students to gain a deeper understanding of this theoretical knowledge and better grasp the application of Economics concepts and principles in real life. Patir's (2020) explanation that the Case Study Method brings real-life issues into the teaching context makes this method a relevant strategy to address this study's research problem of how teachers can create learning experiences that assist students to connect to and see the relevance of the abstract theories and concepts that they learn. This method enables students to connect theoretical concepts with real-life issues, leading to a deeper understanding of those concepts. Simkins et al. (2021) cite the results of a 2015 study by Rawson et al., which shows that the use of real-life examples, referred to as illustrative examples, enhances conceptual understanding when teaching abstract Economics concepts compared to providing only definitions of concepts.

Simkins et al. (2021) recommend that courses on the principles of Economics include a set of relevant examples drawn from the world around the students, as this will help them make sense of what they are learning, as opposed to just presenting Economics concepts as a set of abstract models.

The use of television news clips and newspaper articles

Another strategy to demonstrate real-world application of Economics concepts and theories to students and show their relevance is the use of television news clips and newspaper articles. For example, Farias and Balardini (2018) note that Macroeconomics concepts, such as interest rates, purchasing power parity, and economic growth, are regularly covered in news stories. The regular coverage of these and many other concepts can be seen as an advantage for teachers, who can use media headlines and current economic news to engage students and help them achieve a better understanding of Macroeconomics and how Economics concepts are applied in decision-making. Wooten et al. (2021) assert that the importance of using television news clips in the Economics classroom stems from their relevance to students. When teachers use news clips that are relevant to both the topic and the students, they can enhance students' understanding of the topic and concepts, which would otherwise appear abstract, thereby enabling students to see the relevance of the material they are learning.

Teachers can also use newspaper articles to bring current real-world events into the classroom, allowing students to link them with the concepts and theories they learn in the subject. Volpe (2015) explains that teachers use news clips because they demonstrate the complexity of business and political situations and how Economics theory is used to unravel that complexity. Picault (2019) identifies press articles as a resource teachers can use to illustrate Economics concepts, and it is suggested that for this method to be effective, students should not only be required to read the articles, but also to analyse them. Volpe (2015) argues that news articles will be impactful if they incorporate technical terminology from the Economics theory being discussed in class by the teacher and the students. This will help students to realise that the issues discussed are not abstract concepts but are applicable in the real world. Picault (2019) recommends that teachers select four or five articles each week, focusing on key Economics terms they wish to illustrate. For each article, they should set one or two questions for students to answer based on the article.

Volpe (2015) offers the following six guidelines to teachers when choosing news clips: (i) The case study should be drawn from leading business newspapers and magazines, or from the financial pages of reputable newspapers; (ii) Recently reported events that are at the centre of public interest can help motivate and stimulate students to follow day-to-day developments; (iii) The article must contain sufficient content to effectively convey the pedagogical values that the lesson aims to impart; (iv) Articles used in class should not be too long, to avoid students losing track of the main issue or their concentration flagging; (v) The article must contain some of the technical terminology that characterises the theory developed in class, and (vi) A good article should contain element of decision-making, where the economic agents involved in the case have to make or have made a decision that needs to be evaluated and analysed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is grounded in a Constructivist theoretical framework, driven by principles such as co-construction of knowledge, active student engagement, and the use of authentic experiences in the learning process. The Active Learning strategies proposed in this study are in line with Constructivist theory, as they aim to promote student participation, position students as co-constructors of knowledge alongside their peers and the teacher, and expose students to real-world material. Employing Constructivist theory as the lens in this study has the potential to create a learning environment where Economics students can grapple with the learning material and their experiences, which will enable them to connect their theoretical knowledge of the subject to real-world practice. This is consistent with Dzaiy and Abdullah's

(2024) argument that Active Learning has its foundations in Constructivist learning theories, which hold that students create meaning through real-life experiences rather than from just absorbing preconstructed knowledge from teachers. Sahito et al. (2025) argue that Active Learning is conceptually derived from Constructivist theories of learning, as propagated by theorists such as Piaget (1950) and Vygotsky (1978), which contend that learning occurs through an active process that enables students to develop knowledge in specific contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study, grounded in a transformative paradigm, employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. A transformative paradigm was adopted as this research aims to bring about a shift from the textbook-driven approach generally used in the teaching of Economics. The proposed shift was to be achieved through a collaborative effort between the main researcher, Economics teachers, students, and other relevant stakeholders, who would serve as research participants.

The researcher employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants, with the main consideration being their lived experiences as teachers and students of the subject, which put them in a good position to provide in-depth data to address the research problem. Campbell et al. (2020) explain that researchers use a Purposive Sampling strategy with the assumption that specific individuals hold essentially different perspectives about the ideas and issues at the centre of research, and they should therefore be included in the sample to achieve the aims and objectives of the study.

Focus group discussions with participants, as well as one-on-one discussions with the researcher and other relevant stakeholders who were unable to participate in the core research team due to distance and other commitments, were used to generate data. The data generation process followed an action-oriented approach, progressing through several phases. Kjellström and Mitchell (2019) state that PAR is carried out as a cycle of Planning, Action, Observation, and Evaluation.

In the first stage of the research, that is, the Planning phase, the teachers and students who consented to participate in the study held a series of focus group meetings. These meetings focused on building a shared understanding of the problem under investigation and on proposing strategies to address it. In the second stage of Action and Observation, teachers took turns teaching using the identified strategies proposed in the previous stage, and the other participants observed these strategies being implemented. Teachers also administered post-treatment assessment tasks, designed as concept tests, reflective writing exercises, and student classroom presentations, to evaluate the impact of the Active Learning strategies on addressing the research problem. In the third stage, that is, the Reflection phase, participants convened to share their observations from the Action stage and to assess and evaluate the impact of the implemented strategies. The students' responses on the concept tests, the class presentations, and the reflective writing exercises were compared from pre-treatment to post-treatment.

The data were analysed using Thematic Analysis, a qualitative data analysis method that involves identifying and reporting patterns in a dataset (Naeem et al., 2023). Xu and Zammit (2020) explain that these patterns in the dataset can be identified by understanding the meaning of the keywords used by participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes emerged from the data generated in this study, namely (i) the abstract nature of Economics concepts and theories, (ii) the theoretical and textbook-driven approach used in the teaching of the subject of Economics, and (iii) the need for Active Learning strategies to connect theory to practice in the real world.

Economics concepts and theories are not easily relatable due to their abstract nature

A review of literature related to this study suggests that Economics involves abstract concepts and theories, which is why it is difficult for students to connect it to the real world and see its relevance in their everyday lives. Ng and Karjanto (2023) confirm that a difficulty faced by Economics students is that the concepts taught are highly theoretical and abstract, which makes it challenging for them to see the value and relevance of these concepts to the real world. This challenge, which is due to the abstract nature of this subject, can be inferred from the following responses by participants:

> **Mbali:** *What I can say is that this subject requires high levels of thinking on the part of students. You also need to have an imaginative mind, as some of the topics covered in this subject seem so far from reality that it is not always easy to connect with them.*
> **Omolemo:** I agree with Mbali. One needs to be operating at high cognitive levels to make sense of some of its abstract concepts.
> **Sizijo:** *The first time I studied Economics I could not really understand what this subject is all about as compared to the other subjects I did, e.g. Accounting and Business Studies.*
> **Sizijo:** *I think it is because most of the concepts that we got exposed to were very abstract and did not seem to be part of daily life.*

The students' experiences with Economics as a subject confirm Behal's (2024) assertion that the subject teaches abstract theories and models, which makes it challenging for most students to see their relevance to everyday life.

The theoretical and textbook-driven approach used in the teaching of the subject

The study further found that the approach commonly used in teaching Economics is more theoretical, textbook-driven, and teacher-centred. This theoretical approach seems to be limited in its ability to connect the subject's theory to practice, making it difficult for students to perceive the real-world relevance of the subject's concepts, theories, and models, which remain abstract ideas confined to the textbook. This finding confirms Picault's (2019) argument that Economics teachers generally adopt a traditional lecture approach in their teaching and focus mainly on providing conceptual knowledge, while relying on students' ability to connect this knowledge to practice. Unfortunately, many students are unable to make this connection on their own, which often leaves them feeling that the lessons have no practical application.

The limitation of overreliance on the textbook as the main source of information is noted by Farias and Balardini (2018), who cite the teaching of the topic of Market Structure as an example and observe that textbook discussions of the concept of Market Structure are often hypothetical and rarely include current observable phenomena. They contend that for this concept to become relevant and meaningful, students should be able to relate discussions on the Market Model to the real world (Farias & Balardini, 2018).

The extracts below capture the views of participants on how Economics teachers generally teach this subject:

> **Omolemo:** *Most of the time it was a direct, or lecturer, method. Teachers taught mainly using the textbook method.*
> **Sizijo:** *I have also noticed that teachers often rely on a single method, namely the textbook method.*
> **Kaiser:** *It seemed as if teachers knew the subject matter themselves but could not deliver it in a manner that allowed one to connect it to life and see its relevance. We were drilled to memorise to pass tests and exams, rather than to achieve a deep understanding of the subject and its practical applications in life.*

The above extracts suggest that Economics teachers mainly use the lecture method and that their teaching is more theory-based. Students thus often struggle to relate what they are learning to their everyday lives, and they resort to just memorising content taught to pass. It is thus apparent that students may not be gaining meaningful learning when taught solely in a highly theoretical way and drilled to memorise concepts. This finding seems to confirm Millson and Oxendine's (2020) assertion that teachers must relate lesson material to students, so that they can gain a deep understanding, which will enable them to find meaning in their learning.

The importance of teaching Economics in such a way that students can make a connection with the subject content and can see its relevance is further highlighted in the following statements made by a participant:

> **Danoms:** *The way the subject is taught makes it so abstract that you find some of the topics or concepts you are introduced to look detached from our lives. Although I typically passed this subject, it was mainly due to the drill method my teachers employed, which allowed me to memorise a significant amount of information.*
> **Mabena:** *Was that still the case when you got to varsity?*
> **Danoms:** *Yes, it was. As you know, at university they just lecture; there is no time for spoon-feeding. That was frustrating, because, as I have mentioned, Economics was my major, and I was also planning to teach it once I completed my studies. I was wondering how I would teach something that I couldn't relate to.*

The participant's frustration that the theoretical and abstract way in which Economics is taught makes the subject difficult to relate to and leads to learning by memorisation is confirmed by Mearman et al. (2014), who contend that when the complex aspects of Economics are presented in an abstract, theoretical way, it can be frustrating for students, due to their inability to see the relevance of the information presented.

Active Learning strategies to illustrate the relevance of complex Economics theories and concepts

The use of television news clips and newspaper articles

The study found that teachers need to find alternative strategies to teach the subject of Economics, so that students can relate to its complex theories and concepts. Farias and Balardini (2018) suggest that to make Economics relevant to students, the teaching of this subject should move beyond the chalk-and-talk approach, and that teachers should be open to different teaching methods that can illuminate complex Economics phenomena. The pedagogy of Active Learning has emerged as a suitable approach to address students' challenges with the abstract concepts and theories in the subject of Economics.

The participants suggested various Active Learning strategies that they believed could be relevant and practical in teaching complex Economics theories and concepts, enabling students to relate to them and see their real-world relevance:

> **Bonjo Bee:** *I might as well use relevant newspaper articles or look for case studies that cover a particular concept I am teaching at that time. This will help them to see that the theory in the textbook is applicable in real life.*
> **Sebata:** *Teachers can, for example, bring a case study, a newspaper article, or a business magazine article, as well as news clips from the radio or TV that are relevant to the concepts they are going to teach. This will demonstrate to the students that what they are learning in class actually happens in the real world.*

> **Sizijo:** *You can ask the students to watch the news and report to the class the next day which parts of the news bulletin they can link to what they are currently studying in Economics, or what they have already learnt.*

The extracts above show that teachers can help students see the relevance of abstract concepts they learn in class by incorporating current real-world examples, such as newspaper articles and clips from television news bulletins. The literature reviewed in this study similarly suggests using news clips to illuminate Economics concepts and theories. Farias and Balardini (2018), for example, identify interest rates and exchange rates as some of the Macroeconomics concepts regularly covered in news stories. Teachers can therefore use media headlines and current economic news to engage students and help them better understand how Macroeconomics is applied in decision-making.

The Case Study Method

The literature review also identifies the Case Study Method as a relevant strategy for illustrating the real-world relevance of the abstract concepts and theories taught in Economics. It is highlighted that case studies illustrating real-world current economic and political events provide a means to relate theory to practice. For example, Li (2019) proposes using the Case Study Method to help students gain a deeper understanding of theoretical knowledge and to see how Economics concepts and principles apply in real-life situations. Similarly, Simkins et al. (2021) note that the use of real-life examples through case studies improves conceptual understanding when teaching abstract Economics concepts compared to providing only definitions of concepts.

The impact of news clips and the Case Study Method in illustrating the relevance of abstract Economics theories and concepts

The extracts below show the impact that participants have observed when teachers incorporate news clips and the Case Study Method into their teaching:

> **Van der Sele:** *With time, I soon realised that case studies are based on real events and that they are not abstract, because they talk about real-world events that have happened or which are currently in the public domain. They create interest on the part of students, as they bring into the classroom the actual events happening out there.*
> **Danoms:** *One was then forced to start reading newspapers or searching for case studies, with the intention of finding something that is connected to the topics covered in Economics. In this way, I began to make sense of the concepts that I initially thought were unrelated to daily life.*
> **Sizijo:** *The news bulletin part and newspaper section on economic indicators is relevant for making connections with topics such as Exchange Rates, Balance of Payments, and Inflation.*

The statements made by the research participants seem to be confirmed by Farias and Balardini (2018), who argue that complex Economics theories can be made more relevant by incorporating everyday life experiences to enhance student learning. Farias and Balardini (2018) assert that the teaching of Economics should emphasise bringing real-world issues and everyday life experiences into the classroom, so that complex Economics theories can be made relevant and students can relate Economics theory to practice.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the theories and concepts taught in Economics are abstract and complex for students to relate to, and they are perceived as irrelevant to students' everyday lives. The research also concludes that the problem is compounded by the dominant teaching method, which emphasises theoretical instruction and minimal use of current real-world events to connect theory to practice. It was found that this approach leads students to rely on the memorisation technique of rote learning to pass, even though they cannot relate to or demonstrate a deep understanding of the subject matter. The study therefore recommends that teachers adopt Active Learning strategies that incorporate current real-world examples in the teaching of Economics, and that they actively engage students in the learning process, providing opportunities and creating experiences that allow them to relate to the material they learn. Television news clips, newspaper articles, and the Case Study Method are recommended in this study as effective real-world means of bridging the gap between classroom theory and practice. Future research should investigate other strategies that can be used effectively and efficiently in teaching Economics, to make its concepts and theories more relatable to students, thereby generating interest and motivation to learn the subject and improving student performance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author takes this opportunity to thank all the research participants who made this study possible by sharing their lived experiences in the teaching and learning of Economics.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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