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Leveraging outside readings and low-stakes writing assignments to promote student engagement in an economic development course

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ABSTRACT
The author of this article describes an intermediate economics course structured around outside readings, which include academic journal papers, policy briefs, and news articles. Students complete low-stakes, high-frequency writing assignments that promote accountability and encourage critical thinking about the readings. This pairing of outside readings and writing assignments leads to increased student engagement, high rates of self-reported reading, and high satisfaction with the course without imposing an unreasonable grading workload on the instructor. This model may be especially useful to instructors in intermediate and advanced courses who seek to increase students' exposure to recent developments in their field and strengthen their ability to engage critically with economic theory and ideas.

KEYWORDS
Development economics; outside readings' pedagogy; undergraduate education

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Across intermediate-level economics courses, instructors often rely on a foundational textbook to highlight important themes and theories, with the opportunity to connect first-hand with research reserved for upper-level seminars. I present an approach to building an intermediate-level course in economic development that instead relies on outside readings. Students read a general-interest development economics text, *Poor Economics* (Banerjee and Duflo 2011), alongside academic papers, policy briefs, and news articles. Several times during the semester, they view recorded or live research seminars and conference sessions, and they can choose across multiple sessions or topics when appropriate. This approach allows students to encounter and think critically about a broader range of perspectives and voices, build experience in reading and interpreting academic papers, and gain exposure to both well-established ideas in economics alongside cutting-edge innovations and findings that have not yet made their way to textbooks.

Because readings are effective only if students actually read and engage with them, students complete low-stakes, high-frequency writing assignments to encourage accountability and increase in-class engagement. Specifically, they write a 400- to 500-word "reading response" prior to *each* class meeting that answers a series of instructor-posed questions about the assigned readings. These questions are designed to encourage reflection and critical thinking about the readings, and they serve as a launching point for in-class discussion and activities.

Across university courses, compliance with reading assignments is often low, with studies estimating that fewer than one-third of students complete assigned readings prior to class (Burchfield and Sappington 2000; Connor-Greene 2000). Providing accountability through a pre-class assignment can increase both student compliance and in-class engagement (Tomasek 2009). Routine assignments, like quizzes or essays

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before every class, can avoid creating a sense that these checks are "punitive," which can reduce student morale and deter faculty from implementing them (Connor-Greene 2000).

The reading responses also offer advantages beyond student accountability. The act of writing itself can foster learning (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, and Wilkinson 2004), encourage students to engage critically with the readings, and facilitate a conversation between instructor and student. By reviewing even a selection of responses before class, instructors can check students' conceptual understanding and address learning gaps during class in the spirit of just-in-time teaching approaches (Novak et al. 1999). The structure of reading responses also provides flexibility for instructors to tailor the prompts to reflect their own learning goals, which could be best served by checks of student completion or understanding, asking students to connect with personal experiences, providing opportunities for critical thinking, or some combination of the three (Tomasek 2009).

Course overview: Economic development

The institutional setting is the University of Vermont, a mid-sized state flagship university. Economic Development is a three-credit course that enrolls 45 students and serves economics majors and minors almost exclusively. This version of the course centered on outside readings was taught in spring 2017 and fall 2018. In fall 2020, it was remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The assignments and exercises were broadly similar between the in-person and remote versions, with frequent pre-class writing assignments and substantial in-class small group work.

Roughly half of the students major in economics, one-quarter are business majors minoring in economics, and the rest are economics minors in other disciplines (table 1). Within the economics department, approximately 25 percent of majors and 27 percent of minors identify as female, which is close to the gender distribution of the fall 2020 economic development class, although there is a larger share of women in the fall 2018 class. The course prerequisites are principles of microeconomics and principles of macroeconomics, and this course does not serve as a prerequisite for any other courses.

Course structure

The course typically meets three times weekly for 50 minutes. Class time is divided between lecture, whole-class discussions, and small-group discussions. Students spend approximately half of the class time working in small groups, usually using a handout or worksheet to structure their discussion.

The fall 2020 remote version had an adjusted class schedule to permit smaller discussion groups. Each week, students met once as an entire class and once with their "discussion session," comprising half the class. Students completed a set of asynchronous activities each week in lieu of a third meeting. The large class sessions were primarily lectures, with opportunities for discussion and responses by raising hands or using the class chat. During discussion sessions, students met with an assigned group of 5 to 6 students each week, and groups remained constant to foster social connections. Approximately half of the class time was spent in small groups, working through an activity on a shared document, and the other half was spent in discussion as an entire section.

The exercises themselves remained similar between the in-person and remote versions of the course. Students completed reading responses prior to class, and they completed discussion activities around the readings in small groups during class meetings. The main difference is that in the remote version of the course, students worked in fixed small groups that remained consistent throughout the semester. With the in-person version, they alternated between working independently, in pairs, or in small groups, depending on the nature of the activity. Students did not have defined group roles in either setting, although each group received quick instructor visits to check in, answer questions, and ensure that all students were engaged. Within this framework, however, it would be easy to assign specific group roles if ensuring an even distribution of the workload across members is an important goal.

The current iteration of the course focuses on answering three sets of questions: (1) What is poverty? Why are some countries poor?; (2) What do we know about reducing poverty? How do we know it?;

Table 1. Economic development student demographics.

	Fall 2018		Fall 2020	
	N	%	N	%
Year				
Second year	14	33%	16	34%
Third year	17	40%	16	34%
Fourth year	11	26%	15	32%
Non-degree	1	2%		
Major				
Economics	23	53%	27	57%
Business	10	23%	12	26%
Other	10	23%	8	17%
Economics minor	19	44%	17	36%
Demographics				
Female	17	40%	10	21%
At home			14	30%
On-campus	43	100%	33	70%

and (3) How can economics help confront big challenges in development? Each week covers a specific topic, listed in table 2, which includes theories of economic growth, foreign aid, health and nutrition, education, microfinance, savings and investment, migration, climate change, and pandemics.

Because students read academic articles throughout the second and third units, the first week of the second unit includes direct instruction on how to read and interpret academic articles. Students primarily read papers that use randomized controlled trials—a methodological approach that they can understand without additional statistical background—to test economic theories and the effectiveness of anti-poverty interventions. In their preparation, students first learn about causal impact evaluation, with an emphasis on the importance of a reliable counterfactual. Students then read a chapter excerpt on impact evaluation from De Janvry and Sadoulet (2015), which readies them for a lecture and discussion about the theory behind and implementation of randomized controlled trials. Turning to the act of reading academic papers, we discuss various goals: to conceptualize new work, to extend or test a model, to understand what the evidence is and whether it is believable, etc. This discussion highlights that to learn about a paper's main question and findings, as this course emphasizes, the abstract, introduction, and conclusion are the most crucial places to focus. Finally, students receive a conceptual introduction to regression analysis that includes how to identify and interpret coefficients, which highlights the role of the accompanying descriptive text to help with interpretation.[1] Time permitting, students work in small groups to practice identifying and interpreting key results in an academic paper.

Each unit lasts four to six weeks and ends with a capstone: a take-home exam, a mini-grant proposal, and a policy brief. The last two capstones in particular ask students to communicate economic ideas in a formal writing assignment, which requires them to conduct outside research in an area of their choosing and link it to insights, concepts, and findings from the class. Table 3 shows the grading weights for each activity; reading responses account for about one-third of students' total grades, reflecting their importance to the class learning objectives.

Use of outside readings

The only book assigned for the course is *Poor Economics* by Banerjee and Duflo (2011), a general interest development economics text with a microeconomic emphasis, which we cover across six class meetings (about 20% of classes) during the semester. Other assigned readings come from academic papers, newspaper and magazine articles, policy briefs, and excerpts of economics books also written for general audiences (such as Mullainathan and Shafir's *Scarcity* (2013) and Acemoğlu and Robinson's *Why Nations Fail* (2013)). Short videos and podcasts complement these readings. See appendix B for course readings from a selected set of weeks; the full set of readings are available upon request.

Most assignments remain constant across semesters, although the use of outside readings makes it simple to bring in more current evidence or replace something that did not work as well as anticipated.

Table 2. Course units and weekly topics.

Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3
What is poverty? Why are some countries poor?	*What do we know about reducing poverty? How do we know it?*	*How can economists confront big challenges in development?*
Introduction	Measuring what works	Climate change
Colonialism and institutions	Health	Pandemics
Foreign aid	Education	Sustainable Development Goals[a]
Poverty traps	Microfinance and UBI	Conclusion
	Savings and investment	
	Migration	

[a]Sustainable Development Goals was cut to allow additional time for the pandemics unit.

Table 3. Economic development grading weights.

	Fall 2018	Fall 2020
Participation	15%	20%
Reading responses	25%	35%
Exams	50%	15%
Presentation		10%
Papers (2)		30%

Note: Fall 2020 was centered around three capstone assignments: one take-home exam (exam), one mini-grant proposal (paper), and one policy brief (paper).

Overall, students read approximately 60 pages per week, but the number of assigned pages varies substantially throughout the semester.

Motivation for outside readings

While economic development courses generally share some core themes and objectives, there is substantial heterogeneity across instructors and institutions in their approaches to integrating and applying theoretical methods, conducting empirical methods, and evaluating findings and stylized facts (McKenzie and Paffhausen 2018). Table 4 provides the learning objectives for the Economic Development course, which align with the competencies that Allgood and Bayer (2017) propose. On the spectrum of courses in economic development, this course is more applied than theoretical. Specifically, students build a conceptual understanding of economic theories and review empirical evidence that does or does not support those theories. The use of outside readings supports all four learning objectives.

The class starts with students watching author Chimamanda Adichie's 2009 TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," which explores how it is those with power who determine whose stories are told and heard. In that spirit, the first learning objective (LO1), "to synthesize a range of voices and perspectives and develop a broad understanding of the determinants of poverty and economic growth," is a crucial motivation for centering the course on outside readings, as it provides flexibility to consider authors' backgrounds and perspectives in the selection of material. In the case of foreign aid, for example, this means bringing in contrasting perspectives of American economists Jeffrey Sachs and William Easterly along with Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo, discussed in more detail in the "Examples" section. More broadly, the process of selecting readings considers the diversity of authors in terms of gender, race and ethnic background, and national origin, as ensuring that the perspectives of scholars and citizens from developing countries are included is particularly important in a development economics course.

Article summaries and policy briefs enable students to gain exposure to a wide range of studies, supporting the second learning objective (LO2), "to use economic theory to understand barriers to economic growth, challenges and trade-offs that individuals and governments in low- and middle-income countries face, and the effectiveness of small- and large-scale interventions to reduce poverty." When students engage directly with the assigned academic journal articles, as they do regularly in this class, they also gain skills in reading and interpreting quantitative results. This practice supports the course's third learning objective (LO3), "to understand how economists generate rigorous knowledge, to interpret quantitative results, and to critically examine strategies and assumptions underlying measurement of

Table 4. Economic development course learning objectives.

LO1	To synthesize a range of voices and perspectives and develop a broad understanding of the determinants of poverty and economic growth.
LO2	To use economic theory to understand barriers to economic growth, challenges, and tradeoffs that individuals and governments in low- and middle-income countries face, and the effectiveness of small- and large-scale interventions to reduce poverty.
LO3	To understand how economists generate rigorous knowledge, to interpret quantitative results, and to critically examine strategies and assumptions underlying measurement of causal impacts.
LO4	To communicate economic issues clearly and concisely in multiple forms of writing.

causal impacts." Watching recent research presentations complement these efforts by showing how economists actively engage the scientific process in their own work. A balance between both academic articles and policy briefs or summaries challenges students to tackle more technical papers, while also providing exposure to a broader body of literature than possible if they read only academic papers.

While the fourth learning objective (LO4), "to communicate economic issues clearly and concisely in multiple forms of writing," is most directly pursued through structured writing assignments, exposure to multiple forms of writing and storytelling through the assigned readings provides models of communication that students can draw from in their own assignments.

Promoting accountability and engagement through reading responses

The readings for each class meeting are tied to a set of reading response questions, which serve as a set of low-stakes writing assignments to ensure accountability, structure students' reading, and increase engagement with the text. Students receive a set of guided reading questions and respond with a minimum of 400 to 500 words. For the most part, students do the readings. They come to class prepared. Compared to a previous semester in which students took in-class reading quizzes but did not complete reading responses, both small-group and large-group discussions were transformed.

Evidence of student reading and engagement is clear in observations of small-group discussions and in student self-reports. Table 5 summarizes students' assessment of their own reading behavior, with the caveat that students may over-report their own reading frequency (Sappington, Kinsey, and Munsayac 2002). Students do most of the readings most of the time: on average, they "thoroughly" did the readings 58 percent of the time, and they read about half of the readings 25 percent of the time.[2] This mirrors what they report about their own classmates: 88 percent of students said that in their small groups of 4 to 5 students, "most" (55 percent) or "all" (33 percent) of the students in their groups did all the readings in a typical week.

The reading responses also help structure how students read, which is particularly important when readings are long, daunting, and/or technical. Roughly half of the students said they consulted the reading responses before reading the assignments, then returned to the prompts. Another 40 percent said they reviewed the prompts, then looked for answers in the readings before returning to the prompts, which highlights the importance of considering the intended level of engagement while drafting questions. The questions assigned for academic articles tend to be fairly similar: students describe the research questions(s), methodology, key findings, and any outstanding questions they had. The "Examples" section illustrates this structure through the set of questions based on Cohen and Dupas (2010). This process helps students build skills in parsing the components of academic papers, which pay off when pursuing written research assignments for this and other classes.

Table 5. Self-reported reading engagement ($N = 33$).

Consider the 33 assigned reading responses. For about how many did you…	# Readings	% Readings
Submit response and thoroughly read/watch readings	19.1	58%
Submit response and read about half of the readings/videos	8.2	25%
Submit response and skim the readings/videos	9.6	29%
Submit response without reading/viewing	0.1	0%
Did not submit response	2.7	8%

Requiring that students write at least 500 words seems to be the “sweet spot,” as students have enough space to engage fully with the questions without being overwhelmed. Most students agreed: 85 percent reported that the word requirements were “just right,” while the remainder said it was too high, with one student noting that it led them to add “filler” to reach the word limit. In a previous semester, students completed 300- to 350-word responses to a similar set of prompts. However, the shorter length seemed to make “fudging” a bit more tempting; broadly, student responses on average did not answer the questions as deeply as they did with the higher word limit.

Beyond encouraging student accountability and engagement, the collected responses serve several additional purposes. Reviewing them before class allows a check of students’ understanding, areas of confusion, and places to direct the class conversation. Bringing in comments or insights from the readings to launch class discussions is an especially useful technique to highlight contributions from students who are engaging critically with the material on their own but reluctant to contribute in large-group settings. Finally, the writing that students produce through these assignments forms a body of evidence and can serve as a study aid for exams. At the end of the semester, students have written at least 15,000 words for this class, about 40 double-spaced pages!

Additionally, this class structure provides an adaptive platform for engagement and ad hoc activities while adhering to a transparent grading scheme and a consistent schedule. Instructors can integrate activities such as online simulations, data explorations, or commenting on other students’ work all within the structure of a pre-class reading response, which means that infrequent activities or mid-semester changes can be implemented smoothly without disrupting the flow of assignments or complicating grading weights.

Examples

To illustrate how the course integrates outside readings with reading response questions, this section describes readings assignments for two specific class sessions and their corresponding reading response prompts, and it discusses how these materials advance the course learning objectives. In general, the reading response questions are tailored to each set of readings, although it is possible to develop more standardized questions, particularly when helping students build confidence navigating academic papers.

Foreign aid

During the first unit, “What is poverty? Why are some countries poor?,” students spend a week on foreign aid, which bridges the prior week’s discussion on colonialism and institutions with the next week’s introduction to poverty traps. In the first session, students read an excerpt from Jeffrey Sachs’s *The End of Poverty* (2005), which argues for wealthy nations to dramatically increase foreign aid in order to end global poverty. For the second session, students read excerpts from books by William Easterly and Dambisa Moyo, who disagree sharply with Sachs’s premises and conclusions, doing so in different ways.

This unit exposes students to experts with contrasting perspectives (LO1) on a key issue for many governments of both donor and recipient countries (LO2): does foreign aid reduce poverty? Students write a 500-word response to the prompts in table 6, in which they summarize the three authors’ arguments, explicitly contrast their perspectives, and think about what sort of evidence would be necessary to assess the effectiveness of aid (LO3).

Health and nutrition

During the second unit, “What do we know about reducing poverty? How do we know it?,” students engage with academic studies directly or through summaries and discussions in order to build their knowledge of the effectiveness of interventions to reduce poverty and their links with economic theory (LO2). The first academic paper of the course examines whether insecticide-treated bednets to reduce malaria should be subsidized or entirely free (Cohen and Dupas 2010). The paper measures the price

Table 6. Foreign aid, Easterly (2006) and Moyo (2009).

Readings
(*41 pp*) Easterly, William. 2006. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. Penguin Books, New York, NY. Chapter 1: Planners versus Searchers (pages 3–17; 21–22; 26–30); Chapter 2: The Legend of the Big Push (pages 37–55).
(*21 pp*) Moyo, Dambisa. 2009. *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, NY. Chapter 4: The Silent Killer of Growth.
Prompts
1. Summarize the main arguments that Sachs, Easterly, and Moyo each make about (a) the impact of foreign aid on development and (b) what wealthier nations should do (if anything) to help poor countries. You may find bulleted lists the easiest way to do this. 2. Does the persistence of extreme global poverty indicate that foreign aid has not been successful? What information would you need in order to evaluate whether foreign aid "works"? 3. We're discussing Moyo and Easterly in the same class session because they both offer strong critiques of Sachs's main theses. How do their arguments differ from each other? 4. Define planners and searchers from Easterly's perspective. Do you think there is a place for both planners and searchers in the domain of foreign assistance? Explain your reasoning.

elasticity of demand for bednets and tests for behavioral effects of sunk costs, which have important implications for malaria eradication efforts. Prior to this assignment, students read a chapter in *Poor Economics* (Banerjee and Duflo 2011) that referred to this seminal study, and it is also an example we use to discuss how to read and interpret regression tables, which reduces the barriers to entry on this first paper. The reading response questions, listed in table 7, guide students through understanding the authors' empirical strategy and interpreting the quantitative results (LO3).

Adaptive content

The use of outside readings maximizes flexibility in topics and assignments within and across semesters. For example, COVID-19 readings for the fall 2020 semester were chosen midway through the term as the literature was developing rapidly. Additionally, outside readings can facilitate open-ended opportunities that allow students to direct their own investigations in terms of topic, paper, or country of focus.

One example comes from the fall 2020 semester during the week on pandemics. Prior to one class meeting, students were randomized into one of six low- or middle-income countries, such that the members of each small group covered different countries. Each student reviewed the impacts of COVID-19 on that country's citizens along with the government's response, using findings from a set of comparable surveys conducted during the summer of 2020 (IPA 2021). In class, they shared their findings with their groupmates and compared the responses and experiences of citizens across countries. This activity emphasized the real-time impacts of COVID-19 on individuals in low-income countries and helped students see important differences between countries' approaches and the experiences of their citizens (LO2).

A similar well-received assignment involved students reading an academic paper of their choosing that had been presented at the recent annual Northeast Universities Development Consortium (NEUDC) conference. Students selected a paper from the conference schedule to read and then summarize in their reading responses.[3] In class, students presented their papers in small groups. This assignment enabled students to apply what they had learned about reading and understanding academic articles, take ownership of their learning by pursuing topics that were most interesting to them, and learn about the "cutting edge" of the field. This approach also enabled broader exposure to more topics than the class could reasonably cover and helped students see "how research is done" (LO3). During the 2020–21 academic year, students instead attended a (virtual) NEUDC session and completed a similar exercise.[4]

Once or twice during the semester, students attend webinars or conference sessions in lieu of reading a paper. In fall 2020, the shift to virtual conferences and seminars due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that many previously inaccessible academic spaces were now very much open to students. For example, students received a list of recently recorded research seminars on topics in health and education in developing countries, then were asked to "choose their own adventure." Table A1 lists the set of offered webinars and conference presentations from which students could choose. They "attended" their chosen

Table 7. Health and nutrition, Cohen and Dupas (2010).

Readings
(*45 pp*) Cohen, Jessica, and Pascaline Dupas. "Free distribution or cost-sharing? Evidence from a randomized malaria prevention experiment." 2010. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 125 (1): 1–45.
Prompts
1. What are Cohen and Dupas's primary and secondary research questions? 2. Their experimental design has two parts—a clinic-level design and an individual design. Describe the experimental design in detail (i.e., more than "they conducted an RCT and randomized prices." Bullet points may make this easier!) 3. Cohen and Dupas test four main things in their paper. For each one, describe what they find and what it suggests for policy/future research. 4. Price Elasticity of Demand 5. Price Elasticity of Usage 6. Psychological Effect of Prices on Usage 7. Selection Effects of ITN Prices. 8. Was anything surprising to you about their findings? Explain.

seminar, answered a set of reading response questions, and then shared what they learned in small groups. In this assignment, the questions were fairly broad to allow one set of questions to serve a wide-ranging group of research presentations:

1. Summarize the seminar in your own words: What was it about? What questions did the authors set out to answer? How did they do it? What did they find? Why does it matter?
2. Note any reactions or questions you had: things you thought were interesting, questions it raised, directions you'd like to know more about, critiques you had, etc.

Several students reported that this assignment sparked ideas for their own independent capstone projects.

Discussion and conclusions

Outside readings make it easy to tailor the course content to one's learning objectives and explicitly increase the diversity of perspectives and ideas. Students appreciated the incorporation of contrasting, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives. As one student wrote,

> I think the wide array of opinions in our readings is very helpful and beneficial. I have found everything interesting in one way or another so far, because we've been presented with so many varying opinions that it sort of forces us to think critically for ourselves, rather than just read from text and accept what we're being told.

Students appreciate the use of outside readings more generally as well; among students surveyed, only 9 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they would prefer a textbook for the course. Table 8 shows that article summaries, policy briefs, and news articles were especially valued by students in terms of their learning, and nearly two-thirds of students reported that academic papers were extremely or very useful to their learning. For each article type, fewer than 10 percent described them as "slightly useful" or "not useful." Seminars and webinars were more mixed in terms of usefulness, with 24 percent of students describing them as slightly or not useful. Two ways to enhance the usefulness of these activities would

Table 8. Student perceptions of types of outside readings assigned ($N = 33$).

How useful to your learning was each type of assigned readings/videos?	Extremely or Very Useful	Moderately Useful	Slightly or Not Useful
Academic papers	64%	30%	6%
Poor Economics	79%	12%	9%
Summaries, policy briefs, news articles	94%	6%	0%
Short videos (<10 min)	79%	12%	9%
Instructor-produced lecture videos	76%	21%	3%
Live or prerecorded seminars	42%	33%	24%

include (1) more aggressive curation of possible readings and seminars to ensure the content aligns well with students' preexisting knowledge and skills and (2) devoting more in-class time to their experiences to help them contextualize the seminars and draw more explicit connections with how research is done.

There was a marked improvement in the quality of discussions and student engagement after shifting from periodic reading quizzes to regular reading responses. Student responses to the writing assignments have been resoundingly positive. Students recognized and appreciated the integration of frequent, low-stakes reading responses, saying that "it's good to have someone keeping you honest." Another added:

> I like the focus more on our responses than on quizzes as it requires an actual understanding of the material and I think it helps much more in retention than if I was just reading to answer a few questions on an online quiz and then to forget about it.

This specific approach of outside readings is well-suited to a course in any economics field for which (1) academic journal articles are reasonably accessible to the students enrolled in your course (for undergraduate students, theoretical academic articles may be more difficult to parse without additional training) and (2) there is a selection of policy briefs or news articles that are relevant to course material. Both criteria would pertain to most applied economics courses. At a more advanced undergraduate level, an instructor could increase the share of academic articles.

One potential challenge to implementing and scaling this approach is the sheer amount of grading it could produce. Because this class is large, students receive full credit if they answer all the questions and meet a minimum word count.[5] Completion-based grading makes timely grading feasible without consuming every waking hour, and it provides transparency to students. Reviewing a selection of assignments before class and providing feedback—answering a student's question or highlighting particularly valid or interesting points—is a more pleasant activity that lets students know their responses are read while also fostering a conversation between them and the instructor.

This approach to grading is aligned with the goals of the assignment—to get students reading, reflecting, and thinking critically about the content. Lowering the "stakes" through many frequent assignments with no accuracy component may also reduce students' incentive to plagiarize or cheat (Lang 2013).

One way to address concerns about student effort or understanding is to grade some or all responses based on accuracy or clarity, and this grading could be announced in advance or occur at random. In fall 2018, a fraction of student reading responses were modestly longer assignments that were graded based on content and accuracy (this was pre-announced). However, the process of grading was time-consuming, and the quality of the content-graded output was not noticeably better.

A completion-based grading approach makes this general course structure scalable, and it would be easy to outsource grading to a teaching assistant in a large class. It is helpful to skim a handful of responses before class to gauge effectively where the students are or to ask the TA to do this. This approach fits into a traditional grading system easily, but a completion-based approach also would facilitate a transition to a specification-grading approach (Nilson 2015).

Setting up a course based on outside readings does require time to review and select readings and to develop activities around them. This process may also require rethinking class meetings to ensure any lectures and discussion enhance or clarify, rather than simply repeat, the content of reading assignments. However, the reward for this extra effort is a dynamic class that is more enjoyable to teach and that feels fresh across semesters. With accountability mechanisms, knowing that the students have actually read the assigned materials before class opens up more interesting possibilities for class meetings.

Notes

1. Future versions of this course will allocate additional class time to instruction and practice with interpreting regressions.
2. The survey question did not restrict students' total to 33 readings, and some totals exceeded the number of reading responses. Restricting to responses that totaled 33, students on average said that they "thoroughly" did the readings 71 percent of the time, and they did about half 17 percent of the time.
3. This task was made easier for students because David Evans and Alemina Music posted one-sentence summaries of each paper after the conference (Evans and Music 2019), which served as a user-friendly "preview" when choosing papers.

4. Students could instead watch an alternative pre-recorded seminar if their schedules conflicted.
5. Asking students to embed the word count in their reading response saves a lot of grading time in larger classes.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Suggested seminars.

Speaker	Title	Venue	URL
Imran Rasul	The impacts of a multifaceted prenatal intervention on human capital accumulation in early life	University of Chicago seminar	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2ZocZB5m9I&t=1721s
Pascaline Dupas	Expanding access to clean water for the rural poor: Experimental evidence from Malawi	Virtual Development Economics Seminar	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxxzx8rfMyQ&ab_channel=VirtualDevelopmentEconSeminar
Amy Pickering, Robert Dreibelbis, and Rachel Steinacher	Increasing handwashing adherence: Lessons from rigorous evidence	IPA Evidence Matters Webinar	https://www.poverty-action.org/event/evidence-matters-webinar-increasing-handwashing-adherence-lessons-rigorous-evidence
Julian Jamison	Group-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) training improves mental health of SME entrepreneurs	CSAE 2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c20MpIDAMY
Johannes Haushofer	The comparative impact of cash transfers and psychotherapy on psychological and economic well-being	CSAE 2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3ur9CthnxA
Pascaline Dupas	Design and effectiveness of public health subsidies in less developed countries	J-PAL-MIT Economics Lecture Series	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s56TRWLBkzQ&list=PL5Dr5MK6NSsrs9ujl74Zt45UVPLyCxcW1&index=7
Ahkter Ahmed, Ugo Gentilini, Jessica Leight, Tigist Mamo, Mamunur Rashid	Social safety nets and COVID-19: Can we protect food security & nutrition	IFPRI	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gr40YgsVHo8
Michael Kremer	Improving health in developing countries: Lessons from RCTs	Center for Global Development	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kD4pSaM8Ajc
Edward Miguel	Twenty-year economic impacts of deworming in Kenya	Evidence 2 Action 2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_hebUx2nFY
Atheen Venkataramani	Maternal mortality and women's political participation	Electronic Health Economics Colloquium	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly5EN0PIk3c&feature=youtu.be
Manisha Shah	Goal-setting and male inclusion: Improving sexual and reproductive health for female adolescents	CEGA/BRAC	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybHd_WQIVaY
Michael Walker	Twenty-year economic impacts of deworming in Kenya	PacDev 2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SGn9dHNkuU
Megan Rounseville	Can text messages improve children's health? Evidence from Ecuador	PacDev 2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LV_7mqKa0lA&list=PLaFy9toa8O6MN3hY6G3YQGileioo63LkW&index=11
Laura Derksen	Appointments vs. hard commitments, overcoming self-control problems in preventive health	PacDev 2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7rl3-KEgYM&list=PLaFy9toa8O6MN3hY6G3YQGileioo63LkW&index=10
Manisha Shah	A randomized evaluation of a large-scale sanitation program in Indonesia	UC Irvine Seminar	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqDdUYUrYJo
Achyuta Adhvaryu	Diagnosing quality: Learning, amenities, and the demand for health care	IIMA-CMHS Virtual Healthcare Research Seminar Series	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_xm6cxjOzM

Appendix B

EC140 Sample Readings

Below, I include sample readings from two weeks of class from the fall 2020 semester. The full set of readings is available upon request.

Week 3	Foreign Aid
Monday	(*35 pp*) Sachs, Jeffrey D. 2005. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*. Penguin Books, New York, NY. Pages 226–38; 244–45; 309–28.
Wed/Fri	(*41 pp*) Easterly, William. 2006. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. Penguin Books, New York, NY. Chapter 1: Planners versus Searchers (pages 3–17; 21–22; 26–30); Chapter 2: The Legend of the Big Push (pages 37–55). (*21 pp*) Moyo, Dambisa. 2009. *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, NY. Chapter 4: The Silent Killer of Growth.
Asynchronous	Lecture Video: Poverty traps
Week 7	**Education**
Monday	(*33 pp*) *Poor Economics*, Chapters 4 and 5.
Wed/Fri	(*5 pp*) Hanna, Rema, and Vestal McIntyre. "Implementation ups and downs: Monitoring attendance to improve public services for the poor in India." VoxDev.org. July 14, 2017. http://voxdev.org/topic/health-education/implementation-ups-and-downs-monitoring-attendance-improve-public-services-poor-india (*6 pp*) Andrabi, Tahir, Jishnu Das, and Asim Ijaz Khwaja. "The power of information in improving school performance." VoxDev.org. June 26, 2017. http://voxdev.org/topic/health-education/power-information-improving-school-performance
Asynchronous	Lecture Video: Remedying education (*29 pp*) Banerjee, Abhijit V., Shawn Cole, Esther Duflo, and Leigh Linden. "Remedying education: Evidence from two randomized experiments in India." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122, no. 3 (2007): 1235–64.