The Econlowdown Educational Platform of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis

DAVID SHANKLE

Southern Nazarene University

ABSTRACT: As Christian business faculty seek to adopt new technologies that improve student engagement and learning, a tool offered through the Federal Reserve Bank (Fed) of St. Louis deserves consideration. This review offers a summary of Econlowdown, an online learning resource offered by the Fed of St. Louis. The tool can be utilized in a traditional face-to-face format, an online format, or a hybrid format.

ECONLOWDOWN OVERVIEW

Econlowdown is a part of the Economic Education Program at the (Fed) of St. Louis. When reviewing the biographies of the employees who work on the Fed's Economic Education Program, various experts emerge, including professionals with advanced degrees in economics, curriculum designers, college professors, and secondary educators ("Federal Reserve," 2021). In other words, the Fed of St. Louis assembled a very capable team to develop Econlowdown. This team was clearly cognizant of learning styles as they developed Econlowdown. Various assignments and learning tools are incorporated into Econlowdown that appeal to auditory learners, visual learners, kinesthetic learners, and reading and writing learners.

WHAT IS ECONLOWDOWN AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Econlowdown is an online learning platform. Think of learning management systems like Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, etc., but it is specifically for economics education. It can be used as a stand-alone learning system, but the platform seems to be maturing as it can also be integrated into Canvas, and student registration can happen through Gmail accounts as opposed to manual entry. These seem to be relatively new developments, which is great news because it points to the platform growing and becoming more user-friendly.

To get started, an instructor needs to create an account in the system. From there, the instructor has access to create a classroom in Econlowdown. For example, an instructor might create a classroom in Econlowdown that corresponds to their respective college or university Macroeconomics course. Once the classroom is created in Econlowdown, the instructor has hundreds of resources to choose from to build out their Econlowdown classroom. There are ways to sort resources by subject, topic, learning level, language, and length. Some major resource topics included in Econlowdown are economics, personal finance, entrepreneurship, government, and history. Each topical resource that is selected by an instructor is interactive for the student and most have some kind of assessment for a grade. Resources range from 15 minutes to over an hour in length. The topical resources for Econlowdown classrooms include text reading, charts, graphs, videos, interactive spreadsheets, interactive tools, and various combinations of all the above.

Once a classroom is created and the resources are selected, the instructor sets the open and close dates for the classroom and each resource in Econlowdown. Instructors can manually enroll students into the classroom, or they can utilize Canvas integration or student Gmail sign-in. Upon entering the Econlowdown classroom, students can see all the assigned resources and their respective due dates. When students complete an assessment for a particular resource, their grade populates in the instructor's Econlowdown gradebook or in Canvas if the classroom is integrated. An exception would be writing assignments that instructors manually grade. Econlowdown even generates a student syllabus for each classroom created by an instructor.

WHO MIGHT BENEFIT FROM
USING ECONLOWDOWN?

Given that business faculty have hundreds of economic-related topics to choose from to build their personal classroom in Econlowdown, the platform might be a good tool for economics faculty, finance faculty, and business faculty teaching across disciplines. Further, it is free to use once one creates an instructor account. Faculty can choose as few or as many resources as they want to create their Econlowdown classroom, so the utility among business faculty is very high. While Econlowdown does not incorporate a Christian worldview into the platform, it does allow for instructors to take major topics and frame them in a biblical context. It would be very easy to take resources from Econlowdown and engage students in a biblical view of the content in class or in a discussion board.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON ECONLOWDOWN

While first-person would not normally be utilized in a review, it will likely offer some key insights into this software platform. After a thorough review of Econlowdown, I decided to implement it in my Spring 2021, ECON 3053 International Economic Development course. ECON 3053 incorporates a Christian worldview on the topic of poverty alleviation in developing nations. Being that there were no pre-requisites for taking the course, there were several students who had not completed a college-level economics course prior to taking ECON 3053. That is where Econlowdown enters the scene—to help engage students in learning basic economic topics such as national productivity, poverty, free markets, international trade, and factors of production. The instructions and training for faculty using Econlowdown are not great. Fortunately, the system is very intuitive and allowed me to learn by trial and error. I built a classroom for ECON 3053 in a few short hours, and that included reviewing dozens of possible resources to implement in the Econlowdown classroom.

Seven resources were selected to help students understand some basic economic principles. The university where I work builds all student e-mail accounts in Google. On the first day of class, I was able to get all 24 students in ECON 3053 logged into my Econlowdown classroom in a matter of minutes through the Econlowdown Gmail sign-in. I did work briefly with an individual on campus, who is a Canvas administrator, to integrate Econlowdown into Canvas, but the attempt was unfruitful. Canvas integration was a little like the faculty instructions and training,

which were not great, and we decided not to integrate into Canvas this semester. I take the grades from Econlowdown and manually enter them into Canvas. As we move forward, we will likely attempt to integrate into Canvas again, but the manual grade entry is not hard. I have been very pleased with the way Econlowdown assists my students in understanding economic concepts, and students have had no issues navigating Econlowdown. While there were a few minor glitches from the instructor's perspective, the student users have experienced little to no problems with the software platform.

FINAL ANALYSIS FOR USE
IN A UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

As Christian business faculty explore ways to create active and engaging assignments and learning tools in their classrooms, the Econlowdown system from the Fed of St. Louis deserves some attention. It engages multiple learning styles and can be incorporated into traditional and non-traditional classroom formats. While Econlowdown is not a perfect system, it can be navigated easily and can help reinforce economic concepts in various business classes. The platform is not designed to incorporate a Christian worldview, but that does not mean it cannot be a helpful teaching tool. In fact, it can easily be used to convey economic principles that can then be amplified by biblical truths. For these reasons, it is highly recommended as a supplemental learning tool for courses in economics, finance, and cross-disciplinary business.

REFERENCES

Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Economic Education. (2021, January 15). *About the St. Louis Fed's economic education program*. https://www.stlouisfed.org/education/about