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News

SPECIAL REPORT

A Curricular Innovation, Examined

December 16, 2010

It was the fall of 2010, and I was taking an introductory macroeconomics course. As I sat at my computer clicking through the lesson presentation for Chapter Eight: Basic Macroeconomic Relationships, my eye was caught by a "Real World Example":

"Is the U.S. housing market out of equilibrium? For a current example of equilibrium in action, read 'Housing Bubble — or Bunk? Are home prices soaring unsustainably and due for plunge? A group of experts takes a look — and come to very different conclusions.' Keep the housing market in mind as you go through this topic, and use your new knowledge to draw your own conclusions."

The blurb linked to a *Business Week* article dated June 22, 2005.

Few professors of economics would argue with the idea that it's important to relate the material in a macroeconomics course to events both current and historical. But what kind of professor would tie his class lessons to economic news more than five years out of date -- and now painfully ironic to boot?

The answer, at least in this case, is no professor at all. I took my introductory economics class through [StraighterLine](#), an online provider of higher education that [has made numerous headlines over the past couple of years](#) for its unusual business model. Students can take StraighterLine courses for an exceptionally low price, then receive college credit through one of [StraighterLine's partner colleges](#), or through another institution that awards credit for courses evaluated by the American Council on Education's Credit Recommendation Service (ACE CREDIT recommends college credit for 15 of StraighterLine's courses, including the lab and non-lab versions of two science classes) -- StraighterLine itself is not accredited.

StraighterLine courses are not led by instructors; instead, students work through the materials at their own pace, with the (optional) aid of up to 10 hours of tutoring per course, provided by the online tutoring company [SmarThinking](#) -- another business started by StraighterLine's founder and current CEO, Burck Smith. StraighterLine does not offer degrees or certificates, simply courses a la carte: at present, it offers [about 17 different classes](#) in a range of general education subjects, mostly at the remedial or introductory level. ([According to its website](#), StraighterLine is "developing 11 new courses that will launch in the first half of 2011.")

StraighterLine offers three different pricing models, but each results in a total cost far lower than that of college courses offered anywhere else, with the exception of perhaps a handful of community colleges. Students can choose to take any number of StraighterLine classes for a flat rate of \$99 per month, plus an additional one-time fee of \$39 per course; take a single class for a single payment of \$399; or take ten courses over one year for \$999. As a result, the company has received a raft of press attention, much of it positive, with a focus on StraighterLine's low cost and the convenience it affords students.

"Affordable, accessible, flexible, high-quality courses with on-demand assistance," wrote Carol Twigg, president and CEO of the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT), in a [2009 NCAT newsletter piece](#) supportive of StraighterLine. "What's not to like?"

Special Report

Inside Higher Ed's [Serena Golden](#) took StraighterLine's Economics 101 course this year. This article recounts her experiences and what they reveal

"There is no question that there is a need to reduce the cost of higher education ... and it is clear that StraighterLine is doing this," Twigg's piece continues. "There is a clear benefit to both students and the taxpayer."

about the much-discussed curricular experiment.

And Twigg isn't the only big name in higher ed to shine a favorable spotlight on the company. "Smith may be the person who revolutionizes the university, or he may not be," wrote Kevin Carey, policy director of Education Sector, in [a 2009 Washington Monthly article](#) about StraighterLine. "But someone with the means and vision to fundamentally reorder the way students experience and pay for higher education is bound to emerge."

But the low cost touted by its advocates has helped fuel suspicion about StraighterLine: what kind of education can it possibly be offering for \$99 a month? Students at Fort Hays State University, in Kansas, protested when [news of its partnership with StraighterLine broke](#) in early 2009; they worried that it would "cheapen the value of a degree from FHSU," and an English department committee there expressed doubt about the quality and rigor of StraighterLine's composition courses.

In light of this ongoing back-and-forth, *Inside Higher Ed* decided to find out what a StraighterLine course was really like -- firsthand. Last spring, I enrolled in ECON101: Macroeconomics, a course -- indeed, an entire subject area -- I'd never tried during my own college career; the idea was that the unfamiliar material would help keep me from comparing the course to those I had taken in college.

Smith is "particularly touchy," he acknowledged in an e-mail, about "the frequent criticism ... that [StraighterLine courses] don't adhere to the idealized version of a college course.... In my opinion, the more appropriate comparison is how much they resemble a typical college's online course, or an online course for which that college will award transfer credit...."

"We're doing nothing in our courses that's different from anybody else," he added in a telephone interview. "So whether it's McGraw-Hill courses, Smarthinking tutoring, Blackboard LMS, course redesigns, or development theory around the courses, there's nothing that's different."

Economics I: Macroeconomics

Putting Together a Course

StraighterLine relies heavily on the good name of McGraw-Hill, as it must: StraighterLine's courses (with the lone exception of general calculus), as Smith noted, are all built with McGraw-Hill course materials, and accompanied by McGraw-Hill textbooks. The main text for the introductory macroeconomics course is [Macroeconomics: Principles, Problems, and Policies](#), by Campbell R. McConnell and Stanley L. Brue. This is the 17th edition, released in 2006; an 18th edition was released in 2008 (and is now offered with an "Economy 2009 update"), but, said Smith, "to keep costs low for students, we don't want to use the most current textbook because then there's no vibrant used book market for those textbooks."

According to Smith, StraighterLine does play a role in course design: "We employ consultants and faculty to put the course together -- write the scope and sequence of the syllabus, align with the content, make sure the test banks work, etc." But for the materials themselves, McGraw-Hill is responsible — a fact often cited by StraighterLine's supporters. (McGraw-Hill representatives, contacted by phone and e-mail, did not make anyone available to discuss this story.)

"The same materials we're using are used extensively by schools around the country as well," Smith said. This fact is underscored by Carey's *Washington Monthly* article, which describes a StraighterLine student who noticed that her daughter, a community college student, "was using exactly the same learning modules that she was using at StraighterLine, both developed by textbook giant McGraw-Hill. The only difference was that her daughter was paying a lot more for them...."

Similarly, Twigg's NCAT piece states that "McGraw-Hill educational materials [are] developed by educators who have spent years thinking about how to teach introductory courses to college students... [and] are used by thousands of colleges and universities." In an interview, Twigg affirmed that "the McGraw-Hill courses are, I think, generally regarded as being of high quality."

Course Overview

The course is structured as follows. For each of the 19 chapters in the textbook, there is a corresponding "topic page" in the Blackboard account for the course, showing the assignments for that chapter. Ten of these topic pages assign a new "lesson presentation" for the chapter; each lesson presentation operates essentially like a series of PowerPoint slides with accompanying voiceovers. Five additional chapters (3, 5, 10, 13, and 14) have no new lesson presentation, but instruct the student to rewatch the

previous chapter's presentation while focusing on a different set of issues. Four chapters (15, 17, 18, and 19) make no mention of a lesson presentation at all.

Each topic page directs the student to read the corresponding chapter in the textbook, as well as that in the study guide. Many — though by no means all — of the topic pages also have a set of online review activities; these generally include a set of flash cards, a crossword puzzle, a jumble, a matching game, and a round of "beat the clock."

Each chapter also includes two practice tests (not timed or graded), consisting of 10 multiple-choice questions each, and one graded exam of 40 multiple-choice questions, with a two-hour timer (this time limit is a relatively recent change; until earlier this year, students were allowed five hours to take each test). When I took the course, it did not have a cumulative midterm or final exam, although the latest version (which is otherwise unchanged) has both.

To get assistance with any of the subject matter, students can schedule a half-hour online tutoring session with a SmarThinking tutor; the appointment must be made at least 48 hours in advance, and the available hours are extremely limited (at the time I was taking the class, there were a total of four half-hour tutoring slots for macroeconomics each week; as of this writing there appear to be six). Students can also simply "drop in" during SmarThinking's [live tutoring hours](#), which vary by class and time of year -- but in most cases, and particularly in economics, are not "24/7," as articles about StraighterLine often state.

Lesson Presentations and Review Materials

The value of the lesson presentations is debatable. The material that appears on each test is in the corresponding textbook chapter; the information in the lesson presentations often bears only a vague relationship to the content of the textbook, let alone the tests.

The [website for McGraw Hill Online Learning](#) explains that the "courses were built using a set of topics that follow a critical path of knowledge — not a specific textbook's table of contents.... [The courses] are intended to augment and enhance a textbook; the course content is original and does not 'parrot' any book."

In other words, the material in the lesson presentations isn't tied to the material in the textbook. In theory, having the topics covered in a different way, with different examples and explanations, should help students understand and retain the material; in practice, the lesson presentations are often condescending and sometimes utterly befuddling. Students who just want to get through the course and get the credit — that is, the students who are most likely to turn to StraighterLine — have no reason not to skip the presentations entirely: the final grade is simply a tally of all exam scores, and the exams are clearly based on the textbook, so in this sense the lesson presentations are extraneous.

Exacerbating the apparent irrelevance of the lesson materials is their sloppiness in both structure and content. Grammatical and typographical errors like "ressecion," "Ben Bernake," and "camp councilor," among many others, occur with distracting frequency. Text boxes often appear where they shouldn't, or don't say what they should; hovering over the highlighted keyword "depression" on one slide brings up a text box reading only "insert definition." A table showing supply curve determinants is entitled "Approximate Absolute Thresholds for Various Senses." A slide about the Phillips Curve notes that "According to this model, if unemployment and inflation have a stable, inverse relationship. Growth in the economy brings with it inflation."

And, of course, the material is dated; the example that begins this article is one of many. The very first lesson presentation — the course introduction — uses the example of the Great Depression to illustrate the importance of macroeconomics. The text and narration are filled with remarks like these: "There are factors within our economy right now that might send us into the next depression: a housing bubble, a sudden drop in agricultural supply due to the environment, even another stock market crash. The good news is that sound fiscal and monetary policy is in place to buffer the effects of these possible outcomes in the marketplace."

The content is also filled with minor bugs, particularly in areas that are meant to be interactive: hovering over a keyword to see its definition often causes the entire screen to wiggle back and forth, while clicking the answers to "Self Check" questions sometimes brings up an incorrect response, or a blurb of text that clearly belongs to another topic entirely. (See *the slideshow of course errors and bugs below*; to increase text size, click "Menu" and then "View Fullscreen." To return to original view, press your keyboard's Escape key.)



The review activities are of similar quality. While there are a total of five different types of activity, they are all designed to do the same thing: help the student memorize key terms and definitions. While this is itself a worthwhile goal (though of dubious value for taking an open-book test with ample time to look up word definitions — but more on that later), it is of no use for the areas in which students are most likely to want assistance, such as how to read and interpret graphs, or calculate figures such as GDP. And even for the purpose they do serve, the activities are lazily done: some "crossword puzzles" consist of just a single word across and one down, while one "jumble" invites the student to unscramble the letters "GPD" -- while offering the (incorrect) definition, "The difference between actual and potential output in an economy; this can be positive or negative."

[Keep Reading: Part 2: Econ 101, continued -- and what econ professors elsewhere have to say about the course.](#)

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