Freakonomics Series: A Treasure Trove for ESL Classes

CATESOL 2016, San Diego, CA
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What is Freakonomics?

- An approach that “employs the best analytical tools that economics can offer, but which also allows us to follow whatever freakish curiosities may occur to us.” (Freakonomics, 2005)

- “Marrying the economic approach to a rogue, freakish curiosity.” (Superfreakonomics, 2009)

- Thinking “more productively, more creatively, from a different angle, with a different set of muscles… relying on data to understand how the world works.” (Think Like a Freak, 2014)
• Incentives are the cornerstone of modern life.
• The conventional wisdom is often wrong.
• Dramatic effects often have distant, even subtle, causes.
• “Experts” -- from criminologists to real estate agents -- use their informational advantage to serve their own agenda.
• Knowing what to measure and how to measure it makes a complicated world much less so.
Functionality for the ESL Class

• The books are easy to break down into manageable subsections for ESL students.
• Vocabulary scaffolding is essential.
• Pre-class study questions help alleviate student anxiety.
• In-class questions are useful for monitoring student comprehension and guiding discussion.
• Post-class questions encourage more critical thinking.
• The authors’ own assumptions and conclusions can be questioned just as they question those of other “experts.”
1841-1847, Vienna Hospital: New Mothers Died of Puerperal Fever
More Died with Doctors (Clinic 1) than with Midwives (Clinic 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Clinic 1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Clinic 2</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Births</td>
<td>Deaths</td>
<td>Mortality</td>
<td></td>
<td>Births</td>
<td>Deaths</td>
<td>Mortality</td>
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<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>3,036</td>
<td>237</td>
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<td>2,442</td>
<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>3,287</td>
<td>518</td>
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<td>1843</td>
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<td>274</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2,739</td>
<td>164</td>
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<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>3,157</td>
<td>260</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2,956</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>1845</td>
<td>3,492</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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<td>1846</td>
<td>4,010</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,754</td>
<td>105</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>20,042</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,989</strong></td>
<td><strong>9.9</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>17,791</strong></td>
<td><strong>691</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.9</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall
The Cause of Death Among New Mothers: “Cadaverous Particles”

Doctors performed autopsies to learn how to save lives.

Then they transferred cadaverous particles to new mothers, who died.
The Law of Unintended Consequences

“The law of unintended consequences is that actions of people . . . always have consequences that are unanticipated or unintended.”

---Rob Norton, The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics
Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension
Who are Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner?

How do their careers connect with what they are writing about in their book?

• STEVEN D. LEVITT is a professor of economics at the University of Chicago and a recipient of the John Bates Clark Medal, awarded to the most influential economist under the age of forty.

Who is the audience Levitt and Dubner are writing for? Give reasons for your answer.
"As of this writing, we are roughly one year into a financial crisis that began with a subprime-mortgage binge in the United States and spread, like an extremely communicable disease, around the world. There will be hundreds, if not thousands, of books published on the topic.

This is not one of them.

Why? Mainly because the macroeconomy and its multitude of complex, moving parts is simply not our domain. After recent events, one might wonder if the macroeconomy is the domain of any economist. Most economists the public encounters are presented as oracles who can tell you, with alluring certainty, where the stock market or inflation or interest rates are heading. But as we’ve seen lately, such predictions are generally worthless. Economists have a hard enough time explaining the past, much less predicting the future...

...So we have practically nothing to say in this book about what people call “the economy.” Our best defense (slim as it may be) is that the topics we do write about, while not directly connected to “the economy,” may give some insights into actual human behavior. Believe it or not, if you can understand the incentives that lead a schoolteacher or a sumo wrestler to cheat, you can understand how the subprime-mortgage bubble came to pass.

The stories you will read are set in many realms, from the rarefied corridors of academia to the grimiest street corners. Many are based on Levitt’s recent academic research; others have been inspired by fellow economists as well as engineers and astrophysicists, psychotic killers and emergency-room doctors, amateur historians and transgender neuroscientists.* Most of the stories fall into one of two categories: things you always thought you knew but didn’t; and things you never knew you wanted to know but do.

Many of our findings may not be all that useful, or even conclusive. But that’s all right. We are trying to start a conversation, not have the last word. Which means you may find a few things in the following pages to quarrel with. In fact, we’d be disappointed if you didn’t."

*See Acknowledgments.
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*Endnote: I am not, as some reporters have suggested, a transgender neuroscientist. I am, however, a sumo wrestler.
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Categories of Vocabulary

- Passage-significant
  - *newborn, maternity, contagious*

- Colloquialisms
  - *shenanigans*

- Academic words/Word families/Word Parts
  - *unquestionable, increasingly*

- Rare words - important to study?
  - “...miasma, or... by milk metastasis, lochial suppression, cosmo-telluric influences, personal predisposition...”
  - “adroitly pluck it out”
Vocabulary Activities

• Word Expert Cards
• Vocabulary Logs
• Find the word (in real life)
• Ask students to identify difficult vocabulary—categorize it, and try to guess meaning from context
In chapter 4 of *Superfreakonomics*, Levitt and Dubner propose looking for simple solutions to serious problems. Discuss which approach to problem solving is more effective—looking for simple fixes or analyzing all aspects of a problem. Use chapter 4 and your personal observation or experience to develop your paper.
What is cohesion in writing?

Cohesion refers to the connection among sentences and paragraphs from one to another.

How does a writer create cohesion?

- Transitions (however, whereas, in other words, in addition)
- Repetition (Why did mothers die? Why did doctors survive?)
- Word forms (encourage, encouragement)
- Classifiers (tells what kind)
- Reference words (this, that, those, these, his, their)
Polio is a stark example, but there are countless cheap and simple medical fixes. New ulcer drugs reduced the rate of surgery by roughly 60 percent; a later round of even cheaper drugs saved ulcer patients some $800 million a year (145).

How could it be more dangerous to have a baby in a modern hospital with the best-trained doctors than on a lumpy mattress at home with a village midwife?

To solve this puzzle, Semmelweis became a data detective (135).
Cohesion—Raising You Awareness

(Sentences)

Directions: These short passages were taken from Chapter 4: The Fix Is In—And It’s Cheap and Simple and each illustrates how Levitt and Dubner create cohesion across sentences. Circle each word or phrase in each passage that connects to the ideas expressed by the underlined phrases in the previous sentences.

1. It is interesting to note that the women were generally held to blame. This may have had something to do with the fact that all doctors at the time were male (135).
Chapter 4

- Fact - Complaining
- Childbirth (1840s)
- Law of Unintended Consequences
  - Americans with Disabilities
  - Endangered Species Act
  - Trash Laws
- Bible – creditors and debtors
- Ignatz Semmelweis
- Forceps
- Famine (1860s)

- Whale (oil) (1835-1872)

- Diseases (1840)
  - Ulcer drugs
  - Lithium / manic depression
  - Fluoride in water / dental bills
  - Heart disease – pills

- Automobile (1950s)
  - Seatbelts
  - Car seats

- Mother nature (Present)
  - Hurricanes
  - Global Warming…
Tense

Literary Present
• Author’s opinion and/or beliefs
• General truths

Simple Past
• Actual, real events
• Writer’s personal experience

Establishing Time
a time expression
In the 1840s,…

tense
It is a fact of life that people love to complain…

signal
By the early twentieth century, most infectious diseases were on their way out.
An engaging resource for learning about research in the social sciences and honing critical thinking skills

Sylvia Henel
American Language Program
California State University Fullerton
In the next 15 minutes we will...

▪ **See** what *freakonomics.com* looks like

▪ **Review** the kinds of *podcast stories* posted

▪ **Learn** how to **adapt** an *episode* for an *ESL* class

▪ **Find out** what students can **do** with an episode of *Freakonomics Radio*
Trust Me

Societies where people trust one another are healthier and wealthier. In the U.S. (and the U.K. and elsewhere), social trust has been falling for decades — in part because our populations are more diverse. What can we do to fix it?

by STEPHEN J. DUBNER

November 10, 2016 @ 12:00am

15 COMMENTS

BONUS EPISODE: How Much Does the President Really Matter?

This BONUS Freakonomics Radio episode is an old one we thought you might want to hear in light of our very dramatic and surprising Presidential election. It's called "How Much Does the President Really Matter?" The U.S. president is often called the "leader of the free world." But if you ask an economist or a Constitutional scholar how much [...]

by STEPHEN J. DUBNER

November 9, 2016 @ 3:43pm

3 COMMENTS

Strange Danger: TMSIDK Episode 1

Did you know there is one particularly dangerous time of day to vote? If not, you're not alone. Neither did the celebrity panelists on the first episode of Tell Me Something I Don't Know: Debora Spar, president of Barnard College; Anthony Marx, president of the New York Public Library; and Andy Zaltzman, comedian.

November 6, 2016 @ 11:36pm

3 COMMENTS
On the Radio

Do More Expensive Wines Taste Better?
Season 6, Episode 10 When you take a sip of Cabernet, what are you tasting? The grape? The tannins? The oak barrel? Or the price? Believe it or not, the most dominant flavor may be the dollars. Thanks to the work of some intrepid and wine-obsessed economists (yes, there is an American Association of Wine) […]
November 11, 2016 @ 6:30pm by FREAKONOMICS 1 COMMENT

Should We Really Behave Like Economists Say We Do?
Season 6, Episode 9 You have perhaps come across the phrase homo economicus, which describes a model for human behavior as seen through the lens of economics. In this hour, you’ll hear Freakonomics Radio producer Greg Rosalsky embark on a long and tortuous process to live his life like homo economicus. Is this even possible? […]
November 4, 2016 @ 6:30pm by FREAKONOMICS 6 COMMENTS

Has the U.S. Presidency Become a Dictatorship?
Season 6, Episode 8 Sure, we all pay lip service to the Madisonian system of checks and balances. But as one legal scholar argues, presidents have been running roughshod over the system for decades. The result? An accumulation of power that’s turned the presidency into a position the founders wouldn’t have recognized. At the same […]
October 28, 2016 @ 6:30pm by FREAKONOMICS 2 COMMENTS

Think Like A Child (Rebroadcast)
Season 6, Episode 7 On this week’s episode of Freakonomics Radio: Why would anyone want to think like a child? Aren’t kids just sloppy, inchoate versions of us? Hardly. As Stephen Dubner and Steve Levitt describe in their book Think Like a Freak, it can be very fruitful to think like a child. And then, how can we […]
October 21, 2016 @ 6:30pm by FREAKONOMICS 3 COMMENTS
Radio show host

Stephen Dubner
Convert a Research Study to Edutainment

Start by asking the provocative questions Dubner poses to his audience:

“Can you think of a painless way to save $1 billion that would NOT affect how people feel or their quality of life?”
Check Background Knowledge

Survey what students think advertising & branding are primarily about:

“Are they…

a) fundamentally about trying to inform consumers?

b) really about trying to confuse people and make consumers pay more money than they should?”
Discuss Differences between Name Brands and Generics

*Elicit* students’ opinions on *premium vs. store brands* with an activity

“How do you choose?”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Image 1</th>
<th>Image 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. salt</td>
<td>.25/lb</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Coles Smart Buy Salt" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Morton Salt" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. baking soda</td>
<td>.50/lb</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Arm &amp; Hammer Baking Soda" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Great Value Baking Soda" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. orange juice</td>
<td>1.99/64 oz</td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Tropicana Orange Juice" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Tropicana Orange Juice" /></td>
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</table>
How to Save $1 Billion Without Even Trying

Season 5, Episode 20

On this week’s episode of Freakonomics Radio: doctors, chefs, and other experts are much more likely to buy cheaper, store-brand products than premium brands. What do they know that the rest of us don’t? And if we followed their lead, how much money could we save?

Then, imagine a world with neither marijuana nor alcohol, and then suddenly both are discovered. What happens next? How would they be regulated? How would we weigh the relative benefits and costs of alcohol versus marijuana?
How to Save $1 Billion Without Even Trying

Full Transcript

September 11, 2014 @ 10:00am
by Freakonomics

This is a transcript of the Freakonomics Radio podcast “How to Save $1 Billion Without Even Trying”

[MUSIC: Glenn Crytzer and his Syncopators, “Fumblin’ Around” (from Harlem Mad)]

Stephen J. DUBNER: We recently held a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich taste test here at WNYC, where we record our show.

DUBNER: So guys, this is for an episode about premium brands versus store brands, okay? And so what you see here are two rows of sandwiches, one on a plain white plate there, and one or a bordered plate there. Okay? And the sandwiches were made with either the premium Skippy Creamy and the Smucker’s strawberry preserves. So any nut allergies or verbal waivers, if you die not our problem.
Suzie LECHTENBERG: There’s a lawyer in the room.

DUBNER: Who is the lawyer, you?

Janna FREED: It will be fine.

DUBNER: Good lawyering.

DUBNER: And the store-brand sandwiches are ShopRite peanut butter creamy, they put their adjective last, peanut butter creamy, and strawberry preserves – ShopRite. And the bread is identical. It’s Bimbo.

DUBNER: So really all we want is for you to eat one of each and tell us which one you prefer and why.

Laura MAYER: Patterned plate is the one.

Steven VALENTINO: Tastes nuttier.

John DELORE: More honest stuff in this one.
Identify Each Part of the Research Study Reported on in the Podcast Episode

I. Authors
II. Hypothesis
III. Methodology
IV. Results
V. Discussion

See green handout for specifics
Episodes Students Presented in Class

Some Examples

• Do You Really Want to Know Your Future?
• What is the Best Exercise?
• How to Make People Quit Smoking
• Why Think Like a Child?
• Why Americans Don’t Love Soccer
• What is More Dangerous, Marijuana or Alcohol?
• Is Learning a Foreign Language Really Worth It?
Thank you for your interest!

Good teaching is more a giving of right questions than a giving of right answers.

- Josef Albers
Think Like a Freak - Root Causes

The POWER of POOP
promoting safe, accessible fecal microbiota transplant for all who need it
Examples of student work
Abortion
Japan and Europe

Chocolate Consumption

Number of two-income family

1980-2015

Either father or mother
Both of parents

Number of abortion in minor

1950~2000

↑1980
Game Theory: What Is IT?!
Really? David Lee Roth and King Solomon?
King Solomon & David Lee Roth: Brothers in Thought?

- They both were Jewish
- They both had a lot of girls
- They both wrote the lyrics to a number-one-pop song.
- They both dabbled in game theory
Definition of Game Theory

The art of *beating* your opponent by anticipating his next move
Students in Action

Business Partnerships

Marriage Partner Selection

Cheating in Classwork
Using Freakonomics: Summary of Benefits

- Engages students with a variety of authentic materials in all language skill areas.
- Provides scaffolded preview of very popular university textbook that students may very well encounter later.
- Introduces the field of data mining.
- Shows diverse aspects of American culture both in its choice of topics and in its scientific approach to social issues.
- Puts critical thinking at the forefront and provides a rich model for research design.
Resource: the Website

http://freakonomics.com/