

# Using Handouts in the Bhutanese Classrooms: Its Effectiveness and Limitations in Teaching Learning Economics

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## Abstract

The researcher have used handouts in teaching learning Economics for the last 13 years. So far, no study has been done to examine the usefulness of handouts in the teaching learning process. The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of students on the use of handouts and to find ways to improve the handouts for future use. The data was collected through a structured survey questionnaire with 28 students (11 boys and 17 girls) of class XE of Dechencholing Higher Secondary School under Thimphu Thromde. Open ended questions were included in a structured survey questionnaire to further enrich qualitative responses. Focus group interview with 8 students (4 boys and 4 girls) were carried out to get views and opinions about handouts. The focus group discussions were analyzed using the process of emerging themes. The survey questionnaire data of the close-ended questions were analyzed using SPSS version 24 and open-ended questions in the survey questionnaire were analyzed using axial coding. Analysis of the study revealed that handouts were useful for teaching relevant, useful and important topic areas, especially where class size is large. Suggestions from students to improve the quality of handouts included increasing the font size, having enough space in the handouts for students to write their own notes, use of relevant tables, diagrams and graphs, and including suitable examples to enhance their understanding of topics. Handouts should be distributed in the class at the end of a lesson so that students are not distracted by reading handout during the lesson.

*Keywords:* handouts, teaching-learning, economics

## Background

Teaching is a noble profession done by applying various teaching skills and teaching strategies in accordance with age level of students, availability of learning materials, background of students and the nature and scope of subjects (Subba, 2018). There are various skills, strategies, and techniques to teach economics in secondary schools. Teachers are free to use a variety of skills, strategies and technique based on their ability, interest and experience (Sharma, 1985). One of the strategies or techniques to teach economics for secondary school was through the use of handouts among others. About two to three decades ago, the

use of handouts was relatively rare (Race, 2010). Today a majority of the students use handouts in addition to textbooks to improve their academic performance. In many schools teachers use handouts to provide additional information on the topics taught in the class. Teachers believe that handouts help students understand complex topics, ideas, diagrams and equations on their own and from discussions with friends after school hours.

Although the use of handouts as an additional teaching learning material has much been debated among educationists, handouts are still used in making learning happen and to achieve a high learning outcome (Race, 2010). I have found handouts to be a useful strategy in teaching economics, but it is not yet clear if it is a successful strategy. Therefore, I felt it is important to evaluate the benefit of using handouts, especially in teaching learning Economics.

The researcher have used handouts as a strategy or technique to teach Economics in secondary school for the last thirteen years. Handouts were distributed before the topic or lesson. Handouts containing solved questions from past papers and questions and learning activity from textbooks and question and answer notes were distributed to the students at the start of a chapter or topic to support and supplement the content of teaching session or to cover the omitted points from the teaching session. It is intended to provide additional information and highlight important points on the topics taught. Many topics and concepts, which are difficult to be explained during the regular classes can be read from the handouts.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is not a great deal of study done on the use of handouts in teaching-learning process. The use of handouts in the teaching learning process is not new in Bhutanese classrooms. Today, handouts have an increasing importance in teaching a large class size (Race, 2010). Handouts are also used as one of the important means of teaching and learning in schools.

This study was carried out to explore the Bhutanese students' perception on the use of handouts and find ways to improve the handouts and its use in the teaching learning of Economics. The findings from this study will be useful in preparing and modifying the existing handouts.

### **The Objective of the Study**

This study aimed to explore and investigate the perceptions, problems and challenges faced by students while using handouts in teaching learning. An understanding of suggestions and recommendations from students will be helpful in understanding how handouts can be best used to teach economics in secondary school.

## Research Question

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the views and perceptions of students on the use of handouts in studying Economics?
2. How can I improve the quality of handouts that I use in teaching learning of Economics?

## Literature Review

Literature shows a variety of definitions for handouts by different scholars. However, the definitions are found fundamentally similar in nature and scope. According to McIntosh (2013, p. 706) “handout is a document given to students or reporters which contains information about a particular subject”. In many cases, handouts contain short notes so that students can remember or understand the key points of the lesson (Race, 2010). More detailed information can also be provided in handouts if necessary (McIntosh, 2013).

Literature shows that handouts can be a very useful tool to enhance teaching-learning process. Race (2010) states that students regard handouts as a method of supplementing their reading rather than replacing it. With more detailed information in handouts, students can perform better in assessment and test (Russell, Caris, Harris & Hendricson, 1983). Handouts are a useful tool to engage and enrich the learning process in the classrooms. Handouts help teachers cover more topics in a lesser time, and it helps to increase the instructional time for other learning activities in the classroom (Race, 2010).

Blight (1998) argues that handouts are used to accomplish three goals, firstly to ensure that students have the same basic background knowledge to guide students through difficult lectures and activities; and secondly to save time, deliver more content, and provide more room for students to ask questions. Similarly, handouts became increasingly important in the context of large group teaching and made available to the class after lectures. Children who missed teaching session, teacher tone of voice, body language, facial expression and class participation can cope with the help of handouts. The handouts are more of adjunct to the intended learning (Race, 2010).

In the study by Mikits (2009), handouts are a form of technology, which allows children to gather, process and retain information swiftly. As a result, handouts increase instruction hours and cover a lesson within a short period of time. Similarly, handouts allow children to listen to a lecture and contribute to discussions and look at what the speaker is talking about instead of taking notes. Use of handouts may help increase the attention of a student to spend time and effort in

establishing the understanding of topics taught. Race (2010) outlined that handouts are useful as study guides, referencing and resources.

According to McIntosh (2013), it is important for teachers to distribute or give handouts after the presentation. Students thus are not distracted by the urge to read handouts during presentation or lesson, but are attentive and interactive during the lessons. When students have handouts with them during the lesson, they tend to answer questions asked by teachers referring directly to the handouts, and without actively thinking for answers. Literature shows handouts are important for teachers to use if students demand it for active learning. Most often students demand handouts for additional information and ideas to understand complex topics, process and constructs (Race,2010).

## **Research Methodology**

This study used a quantitative and qualitative approach to collect data. Since the study was exploratory in nature the data was based on a structured survey questionnaire (Appendix A) and focus group discussion. All structured survey questionnaire was piloted with a small group of students before the main study to assess the value, validity and reliability (Bradford University School of Management, n.d.). The study included 28 students (11 boys and 17 girls) of class X E of Dechencholing Higher Secondary School under Thimphu Thromde. One student could not participate in the survey questionnaire due to some unavoidable reasons.

Students of class X E were targeted because they were taking Economics as one of their subjects in the school. Handouts were used as teaching-learning material with them. Structured survey questionnaire was used to find their perception and views on the use of handouts and to explore challenges and issues they might have faced as a result of using handouts. Open-ended questions were included in structured survey questionnaire to enrich the qualitative responses.

Focus group discussion with 8 students (4 boys and 4 girls) through a non-probability convenient sampling technique was carried out to get in depth views and opinions about the usefulness or effectiveness of handouts in teaching learning process from a selected group of students. Focus group discussion can also be a useful way of bringing issues to the surface that might not otherwise have been discovered (Bradford University School of Management, n.d.). The length of the focus group discussion was around 20 minutes.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data collected through the structured survey questionnaire was entered, cleaned, coded and analyzed using SPSS version 24. The quantitative data was analyzed using simple descriptive analysis such as frequency and percentage.

Open-ended questions in the structured survey questionnaire and focus group discussions were analyzed using axial coding. The focus group discussions were recorded and then transcribed. Themes were generated based on the common responses of the student participants. The students' participants were coded as 001 for the first student for anonymity and confidentiality.

## Result and Findings

### Structured Survey Questionnaire

The analysis of the structured survey questionnaire are as follows:

**Table 1**

#### *Gender*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	11	39.3	39.3	39.3
	Female	17	60.7	60.7	100
	Total	28	100	100	

*Of the 28 students surveyed, 11 (39.3 percent) were boys and 17 (60.7 percent) were girls.*

**Table 2**

#### *Students Rating on the Importance of Handouts*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not at all Important	1	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Important	10	35.7	35.7	39.3
	Very Important	17	60.7	60.7	100
	Total	28	100	100	

In general, 60.7 percent of students rated that they found handouts very important, while 35.7 percent of students rated handouts are important in teaching and learning Economics. Six students noted that handouts provide more information and are easier to understand than textbooks. The handouts helped students to understand economics concepts easily.

Overall it is evident from Table 2 that the majority of students seem to find the handouts very important in teaching and learning Economics.

**Table 3**

*How Often do you Read These Handouts?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	1	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Rarely	1	3.6	3.6	7.1
	Sometimes	22	78.6	78.6	85.7
	Always	4	14.3	14.3	100
	Total	28	100	100	

Table 3 shows the percentage of students reading handouts. 78.6 percent of students responded that they read handouts sometimes and 14.3 percent of them have read handouts always. Two students (006 and 008) remarked it is because students need time and preparation for other subjects. Some students prefer textbooks than handouts. In addition, Dechencholing Higher Secondary School is a day-school, upon reaching home, students are forced to run domestic errands for their family besides having to complete homework, projects assigned in other subjects.

**Table 4**

*How Useful are These Handouts?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not Useful	1	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Useful	11	39.3	39.3	42.9
	Very Useful	16	57.1	57.1	100
	Total	28	100	100	

As shown in Table 4 above 57.1 percent of students responded that they found handouts ‘very useful’, and 39.3 percent of them found it ‘useful’ to read. One student mentioned that handouts contain more information than text books. Two students remarked, “handouts contain brief, understandable and insightful information”.

**Table 5***Do Handouts Help Score More Marks in Examinations?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	1	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Yes	27	96.4	96.4	100
	Total	28	100	100	

Table 5 above indicates that 100 percent of students scored more marks in the examinations because of handouts. Some of the responses given by students are handouts are easier to comprehend than text books. More than 70 percent of questions comes from handouts during midterm examination. Handouts contain more information than Economics text books.

**Table 6***Which of the Following is More Helpful to You?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Others	1	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Text Book	6	21.4	21.4	25
	Question Answer Handouts	21	75	75	100
	Total	28	100	100	

To this question, 75 percent of students found handouts being more helpful than just using textbook. Overall most students prefer handouts than Economics textbook. Some reasons they stated are that the Economics textbook is loaded with too many information and that it is bulky to read and follow. Some languages in the textbook are difficult to understand. Whereas handouts, they say contained key points and are easy to understand. Handouts are said to save time for examination preparations, give confidence to students during examination when intervals between exams are too short for full revision from the textbook.

**Table 7***Which of the Following do you Read More?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Others	1	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Text book	7	25	25	28.6
	Question Answer Handouts	20	71.4	71.4	100
	Total	28	100	100	

Table 7 indicates that 71.4 percent of students read handouts more than the textbook and 25 percent of students read Economics textbook more than the handouts. One student remarked “my parents discourage me from using the handouts. My parents encourage me to use textbook for better learning and understanding of the topic”. Overall most students prefer and read handouts more than textbook.

**Table 8***Handouts Are Understandable and Student-Friendly*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not at all Agree	1	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Agree	14	50	50	53.6
	Strongly Agree	13	46.4	46.4	100
	Total	28	100	100	

On the understandability and student-friendliness of handouts, 46.4 percent and 50 percent ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ respectively that the handouts were understandable and friendly. However, 3.6 percent of students reported that the handouts were not understandable and student friendly. Students reported that the language used in the handouts was of a high standard and some spelling and grammatical errors were also spotted. Some sentences are complicated and answers are too long for the questions.



**Table 9***Do you Want Handouts in the Next Higher Class?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not Sure	1	3.6	3.6	3.6
	No	3	10.7	10.7	14.3
	Yes	24	85.7	85.7	100
	Total	28	100	100	

85.7 percent of student responded ‘yes’ to the question meaning all participating students wanted such handouts in the next higher class. One student mentioned “handouts make us lazy and more dependent. Handouts should be discouraged because it does not promote creativity nor fosters student’s competency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.

**Table 10***How is the Layout of the Handouts as a Whole?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Need Improvement	1	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Good	6	21.4	21.4	25
	Very Good	14	50	50	75
	Excellent	7	25	25	100
	Total	28	100	100	

It is impressive to find that 3.6 percent of students felt that the layout of handouts needed improvement.

10. To whom do you recommend the use of handouts?

Almost 70 percent of students recommended the use of handouts for higher classes, XI and XII. 15 percent of students recommended it to other schools and five students recommended for other teachers to use such handouts in teaching. Three students recommended handouts for students who undertake board examinations (Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Examination). Three students recommended handouts to other Economics teachers because it is easy to read and understand handouts. 2 students recommend handouts to class IX who study economics for the first time.

## 11. In your view, how can handouts be improved?

Around 10 percent of students suggested having space beside the answer to add their own notes. 6 percent suggested providing more relevant tables, diagrams and graphs, and suitable examples to be included to enhance their understanding of the topics. 5 percent of students suggested the handouts to be kept shorter and only on selected topics. 2 percent of students suggested narrowing down the subject content so that everything on the handouts can be regarded as important. 3 percent recommended the language to be made simpler and letter fonts bigger. They also suggested to avoid long and dense handouts but to keep them as concise as possible for easy reading. 30 percent of students suggested that the distribution of handouts should be done after a topic or lesson in the class. Such practices will help students to pay more attention to the class.

### Focus Group Discussion

Upon analyzing the focus group discussion with eight students (4 boys and 4 girls) three major themes were drawn. The following were the three major themes from the focus group discussion:

#### 1. Help to understand economics subject

The majority of student participants responded that handouts as one of the major factor in understanding economics concepts. Three students (003, 005 and 008) out of eight students responded that they cannot understand all concepts taught in the classroom. With the help of handouts they can make up the class. One student (002) said, “after going through the handouts, I understand economics concepts more easily”. Handouts also help students to understand the economics textbooks easily. The question answer handouts enhances better understanding of concepts.

#### 2. To cope with missed classes

All participants agree that handouts help them to overcome their absences in the school. Students who missed regular teaching session can cope with the help of handouts. Student 007 said, “I missed many classes due to unavoidable reasons still then, I can make up my classes with the help of handouts, friends and teacher”. Handouts provide another platform for the student who missed regular classes. Students can also explore more information from question answer handouts.

#### 3. Improve academic performance

Most teachers in Bhutan teaching classes X and XII prepare handouts and give to students to help students score higher marks in the examinations. Five

students (001, 002, 004, 006 and 008) out of 8 students responded that handouts enhanced academic performances. 004 students said “I am very happy with the handouts. I am able to do well in the exam due to handouts. I am good at memorizing and I can remember everything in the handouts”. Use of handouts has positive relation with academic performance if handouts are prepared well. The focus group discussion supported the Russell et al. (1983) with more detailed information in handouts students perform better in assessment and test.

However, students faced a number of problems while reading handouts. Four students (005, 007, 003 and 001) said, there are irrelevant tables, diagrams and graphs, not suitable examples outlined in the handouts to enhance their understanding of the topics. One student (001) remarked, “It’s frustrating. Letter front is too small. Since I am a visually impaired student I face difficulty in reading handouts”. 3 students (007, 005 and 001) suggested that “Competency Based Question should be included in the handouts. More than 30 percent of board examination: Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Examination question paper consist of Competency Based Questions”. After the focus group discussion, I felt focus group discussion was very important for me to take into account and plan well for the future.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Overall findings from this study indicated that students are more interested and prefer handouts. The students responses show that they value the use of handouts. Review of students’ ratings indicates handouts were considered important, relevant, useful, and helpful in improving teaching learning process. The responses were mostly positive with few suggestions for future improvement. Therefore, I have come to the conclusion that where class sizes are large, handouts are highly relevant and meaningful to the students. When there are more than 29 students in a class, interacting with every child is not possible and teaching is mostly subject centric than child-centric.

Gauging student’s perception, such handouts are more of an adjunct and lifeblood to the intended learning for student who missed the class or who would not follow the teaching. One advantage of such handouts is to help genuine absentees to cover up the topic. It also provides a reference to other student who wishes to understand difficult concepts or to further modify notes.

By going through the suggestions given by students on the layout of the handouts, the researcher would like to incorporate all their feedback to make the handouts more relevant and user friendly for students. The researcher has also learned that researcher should also add some higher order questions and activities, Competency Based Questions for student to explore on their own or to prepare for

## Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Examination.

Although it is burdensome for teachers to prepare handouts, Race (2010), recommends that the handouts should look interesting and relevant. Simple, useful, informative and relevant handouts can be used to enhance teaching learning. By narrowing down the subject content so that everything on handouts can be regarded as important and students will be further encouraged to invest time and energy on subject matter in addition to textbooks.

In future, researcher would like to make handouts more interesting to study and read by presenting information in simple and understandable manner, including useful and important aspects of the content, using relevant illustrations to support explanations, using appropriate font and layout and give student a feel that some of their work is already done (Race, 2010). Researcher will distribute handouts after a topic or lesson or presentation. Such practice will help students to focus more on issues and teaching learning become interactive during the delivery of the lesson or topic (Mcintosh, 2013). If handouts are distributed before or during class, the students get distracted by reading handouts during the lesson.

## Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted with 28 students (11 boys and 17 girls) of class X E of Dechencholing Higher Secondary School under Thimphu, Thromde. The findings cannot represent enough to truly depict a whole scenario. The study was carried out to see the usefulness, effectiveness and relevance of the use of handouts by a single teacher. It was also a one-time study and it does not show any trends. Although the findings from this study are convincing in using handouts to improve students' achievement, the use of it by teachers depend on many factors. There is no single blueprint to promote effective teaching and effective learning (Cohen, Manion, Morrison & Wyse, 2010). The findings should not be used as it is. Every teaching methodology has got its own merits and demerits (Sharma, 1985). More study needs to carry out at the national level to validate the current results and findings. Further study can also be done in other schools of Bhutan and results can be compared. Another limitation of this study was the limited access to the literature available for review.

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