

Enhancing first year tutorials: A collaborative, problem-oriented approach to learning economics

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Over the past two years, the Department of Economics at the University of Melbourne has developed a model for collaborative, problem-oriented learning in tutorials. The idea is to facilitate a deeper form of learning and a better association between theory and contemporary economic issues and problems. As well, students are given the opportunity to develop learning and support networks. In this paper we focus on one aspect of the project's ongoing evaluation, student attitudes to a 1995 pilot project, derived from pre and post-subject surveys. We found that students in problem-oriented group learning tutorials show more academic application, believe they are better at solving economic problems, and report more satisfaction with their tutors. The design of this approach to teaching and learning, the thinking behind the initiative, and the rigorous evaluation that has been employed, provide valuable pointers for all academics seeking to invigorate first year tutorials.

Creating a dynamic learning environment

First year students in Microeconomics tutorials at the University of Melbourne learn economics by problem-solving in small groups. The initiative has been well received by students and tutors alike. The comments of those involved in a 1995 trial of this new approach to teaching and learning are instructive – one student says:

Compared to last year I understand it a whole lot better, how everything fits together, how to approach a problem comes across much better

Her tutor believes that:

the whole atmosphere of a tutorials is totally different now ... it is so much better when you can walk around the group and just sit with them for five minutes – most of the learning goes on when you are sitting there talking to individual groups rather than to the whole class ... It is better to explain to small groups, as even if it clicks with only one person in the group they can then explain it to everyone else.

Remarks of this kind are typical of the generally positive reactions to the initiative.

Moreover, they point to the genuine educational advantages associated with the project.

Students are active learners and the social nature of learning is acknowledged. Tutors are given more responsibility, grow more confident in their role, and find their teaching more rewarding. In this paper we present findings from ongoing evaluation of the initiative, after outlining the theoretical perspectives that directed our planning, the general structure of the project, and the evaluative techniques employed. We conclude with practical advice for launching similar ventures, based on our experiences

1st level of subheading

2nd level of subheading

Captions for tables and figures