

# CASE STUDIES

## Teaching and Learning Centre Case Study #2 -

### Accounting Case-based Groupwork

Working in groups helps students to draw on new perspectives and challenge their own tacitly held beliefs. It also reflects how decision making actually happens in the world of work. Dr Tommaso Palermo in the Department of Accounting used a case-based approach to groupwork with his second year undergraduate class and found the experience to be a real eye-opener.

Twenty one students volunteered to take part in a pilot study. They were divided into five groups and each group was assigned a tutor. The groups then worked to solve a classic management accounting problem. At the end of term they presented a written report and gave an oral presentation. Giving the students a chance to work on a long-term group project allowed Tommaso to see just how engaged and focused his students could be. It also helped him to challenge some of his own assumptions as a teacher. As Tommaso himself put it:

*We wanted to develop an additional way of assessing students work... the basic idea was a case-based analysis, based on close teamwork... so everyone could feel involved. They had to self-assess what they had done, and provide their own recommendations for the future.*



Case-based groupwork is a learner-centred approach where students examine complex real-world issues; draw on a number of sources, and come up with their solution. Working as groups towards a clearly defined goal (and with the safety net of some experienced tutors) the students were able to draw on literature and key concepts in management accounting to frame their work. Groups were encouraged to self-assess and self-manage their progress. They found solutions but they were also asked to find alternatives – something that encouraged them to see that there is not always one easy answer to a problem. The focus

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for the tutor was not on supplying his students with the answers but on supporting them to develop problem-solving skills that highlighted core principles.

It is easy to assume an 'us and them' approach to teaching and learning but this can limit interaction and stifle pedagogy. Gone are the days where students were thought of as tabula rasa – blank slates to be written on by their teacher. Now we find that interaction, feedback, review and groupwork are more effective ways of learning. Students are bright, talented individuals and, when we create the right environment they can truly engage with their own learning: as Tommaso says, *"Perhaps the students are a bit more brilliant than we think!"* This project allowed students to interact with each other and apply principles of management accounting in a meaningful way that reflects the world of work. The students produced some excellent results and were actively engaged throughout. From a departmental perspective, the groupwork led to the development of a systematic evaluation grid that can be used to assess future group work.



With a successful pilot, Tommaso has now included groupwork as part of the summative assessment of the Managerial Accounting course where it counts for 25% of the final mark. For practical reasons the students will no longer do a presentation but they are given marks for participation as well as producing the final report. There is no real secret to running successful learning activities but Tommaso reports that it helps to be organised; trust in the students; explain to them early on how they will be assessed; set appropriate objectives, and give appropriate support. If you are interested in developing aspects of your own teaching then you may also wish to reflect on Tommaso's rather insightful comment:

*"Don't just tell students what you want them to do but give them the reason behind the activity."*