

Lighting the philanthropic spark

1. Summary of impact

Students sometimes struggle to make the connection between the technical accounting skills they learn at university and their ability to contribute – both now and in the future – to socially impactful change.

“Developing decision criteria, collecting information and weighing up different alternatives, then developing performance indicators and ranking your different options – this is home turf for accounting,” Nicole Sutton, Business School lecturer and 2019 Social Impact Grant recipient, says.

These skills are also precisely the ones that are necessary to make effective decisions when determining which charity is going to be most effective, dollar for dollar, to donate to, says Nicole.

“If you’re thinking about teaching decision bias, it’s also critically important that students have a chance to actually experience the bias themselves. It’s one of the things that everyone reads about and is like ‘Yep, confirmation bias, that’s a bad thing. I’d never do that’.”

But Nicole’s classes show students that, when it comes to allocating money to charities, they – and their fellow classmates – actually would.

The Classroom Giving Games was developed using \$5000 in funding from a 2019 Social Impact Grant. It adapts a concept first developed by The Life You Can Save – a not-for-profit set up by one of the world’s most well-known and pragmatic moral philosophers, Peter Singer – to meet student needs in a university classroom.

2. The problem

UTS business school students are as vulnerable as the next person when it comes to making decisions based on pre-existing prejudices and then bending the available evidence to support that decision.

However, the technical skills students learn in their accounting or business degree could combat this tendency. These skills are also potentially valuable in a not-for-profit setting, and could contribute in a meaningful way to social justice issues – but students sometimes fail to make this connection.

“In the context of making a decision or assisting a corporation or individual to make a decision, accountants can have real social impact. This project is about bridging those two worlds to show the relevance for students,” says Nicole.

3. Beneficiaries

Charities benefit from the exposure given during the class, and, if they are ultimately chosen by the students, the money the class allocates to them.

“We will use 100 per cent of the A\$800 that UTS student’s have allocated to us to buy long-lasting insecticidal nets that will protect an estimated 500 people from the bites of malaria-carrying mosquitoes,” said Rob Mather, CEO of the Against Malaria Foundation, in feedback to the students.

The games also give students the chance to apply their learning in a way that makes a difference in the real world, and understand how their skills could contribute to social good in the future.

“At the end of the day we want this to be shared more broadly, we’re really happy for other educators to take this and put it into their classroom,” says Nicole.

4. Approach to impact

The first five minutes of Nicole Sutton's decision bias class is unconventional: students are presented with \$100, a list of three charities and a choice – if I want to do the most good with this money, who should I donate it to?

Once student's initial scepticism wears off, they find themselves in an unusual position.

"This class is not a simulation. This is not a hypothetical. This is real money – [it's] a decision scenario that has real consequences for actual people," Nicole says.

During the Classroom Giving Games, participants vote three times on which of three charities to give money to – once, when they first sit down; once, after they've gone through a rational decision-making process; and once again after they've had a chance to discuss their decision with their peers.

Basically, the first five minutes of the class is students making a biased decision, walking right into it. And the rest of the class is helping scaffold them to make a more rational decision, but also to reflect on their decision process, and, of course, the implications of that decision in the context of philanthropy," explains Nicole.

All votes are made via student's mobile phones and tallied up in real-time so people can see how their choices compare to their classmates independent of teacher input.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1 The outcomes

So far, 302 students have participated in 20 games, donating a total of \$3000 to globally recognised, high-impact charities as a result of the Social Impact Grant funded project.

For many students, the class has also been impactful on an individual level – Nicole's team has recorded a significant uptick in people who have undertaken the class

participating in programs such as UTS Shopfront, which links final year and postgraduate students with not-for-profits to do voluntary work.

The project team has also recorded a spike in the numbers of students who participate in the class who are actively connecting to on-campus groups like Enactus.

5.2 Impact

Longer term, the Giving Games helps students to critically consider their own decision-making processes when making charitable donations. It also helps them to see how the technical skills they learn as part of their accounting course could be useful in a not-for-profit environment.

Nicole hopes to see other teachers use the lesson plans and other resources the team has developed in their own classes.

“The nice thing is that this topic around decision biases is taught in every business course at every university around the world. We’ve designed the activity to be plug-in-and-play. As long as you have an hour of class time and you want to do something around decision biases, you can do the activity.”

A passionate teacher, Nicole believes the Giving Game activity improves student’s educational outcomes, but the ultimate aim of both her class and The Life You Can Save is to make giving more effective by challenging people to explore their biases and the myths around charities that tend to permeate donation decision-making.

“We’re not claiming that after one class a student’s life is going to be completely transformed but it could be the spark that sets them on a course to pursuing a more altruistic career.”

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

The Life You Can Save developed the concept behind The Giving Games, without their support the project couldn’t have gone ahead. The \$5000 in funding from the Social Impact Grant scheme was also instrumental.

7. Challenges

The first challenge for the project team was adapting the Giving Games to a university context.

“There was a challenge in just making the activity work well and work in a way that still allowed students to be able to learn core business concepts,” explains Nicole. “This was not just a ‘side thing’, it was integral.”

After 20 successful games, she now believes the team has overcome these issues, but technical challenges remain.

“At the end of the day we want this to be shared more broadly, so we’ve used online technology so that it can be scaled. But we also have some people in South Africa at a university there who are interested in adopting this in their classroom. You can’t assume that all students or all the classrooms have access to viable Wi-Fi.”

Despite these difficulties, the project has been rewarding for the whole team, says Nicole.

“On a personal level, receiving the grant has been extremely validating of our work. It helped us feel supported and valued in trying something different within our discipline.”