

Engaging Accounting Students: How To Teach Principles Of Accounting In Creative And Exciting Ways

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ABSTRACT

Many students in secondary and post-secondary institutions generally have a difficult time grasping the concepts of accounting. This article contends that it is not the subject matter that is dry, but rather the methods in which faculty have traditionally presented accounting fundamentals and principles. Departing from standard lectures and textbook assignments can result in a higher level of student engagement through hands-on activities. Presenting accounting principles in student-centered and computer-based learning environments can demonstrate the practicality and necessity of the subject, particularly as a foundation for many career options. This article explores various pedagogical approaches that veteran accounting instructors have successfully used to make accounting attractive and enlightening for students, including blended learning, activity-based modules, games, mentorships, and Internet research and computer simulations. These methods provide opportunities for students to learn with real-life accounting situations. Finally, this article contends that blended learning can meaningfully improve both test scores and knowledge levels of students by discussing the positive empirical results from a recent community college's decision to implement a student-centered pilot program.

Keywords: Learning Accounting; Teaching Accounting; Blending Learning; Accounting Education

INTRODUCTION

Students have long struggled with the basic concepts of accounting primarily due to their lack of engagement inside the classroom. For the duration of most classes, students are listening and taking notes while instructors lecture from textbooks and illustrate key points using only chalk and a blackboard. Educators can no longer rely on these types of traditional teaching methods and expect accounting students, particularly those with no work experience, to stay engaged and involved. As accounting theory and practice develops, instructors need to do more to keep up with the rapid change in business. The solution is to modernize teaching through a student-centered, blended approach that incorporates the Internet, social media, video and games with traditional teaching methods to provide the student with a rich and meaningful learning experience.

CHALLENGES OF LEARNING ACCOUNTING

Accounting is a meticulous, systematic approach to recording, reporting, and analysis of a company's transactions. Accounting rules demand rigorous adherence so that a firm's results correctly reflects reality. Students must not only learn how to record and report certain events, but they also need to be taught what principles to apply in specific situations. No teaching method can alter the strict attention to detail that the subject requires. Students can get lost and confused very early on in their studies if they choose to memorize each accounting principle rather than understand the logic behind each concept.

In addition, because accounting is cumulative in nature, each learning objective builds on the previously learned concepts and procedures. A student must master some of the most fundamental principles at the beginning

of the course in order to tackle more difficult concepts later on. For example, if a student doesn't understand the 'double-entry bookkeeping system' whereby each transaction causes at least two entries in the ledger accounts (a debit & a credit), he will most likely have difficulty learning more advanced material later on. Without additional opportunities to reinforce these concepts, a student can easily become frustrated and perceive accounting to be a boring requirement full of meaningless jargon.

STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

To keep students engaged and active, accounting instructors are experimenting with a student-centered teaching approach that increases the responsibility and accountability of each student. Instead of instructors formulating goals, constructing lesson plans, and grading students, instructors are only facilitators or resources in the classroom. It is up to the student to select topics, timelines, and learning methods. In his book, *Assessing Student Centred Courses*, Professor Graham Gibbs states that students and instructors must act interdependently and negotiate: 'What is to be learnt, how and when it is to be learnt, with what outcome, what criteria and standards are to be used, how the judgments are made and by whom these judgments are made' (1995:1). The actual class, therefore, serves as a forum for hands-on learning activities.

With a stake in their future, students can create and present personal learning goals along with a strategy to meet those goals, utilizing both human and physical resources. Human resources include instructors, mentors, and other students, while physical resources include textbooks and online materials. With goals at hand, students further take responsibility for their learning via peer and self-assessments, both designed to increase the students' autonomy. Research has shown that students learn more effectively and produce higher-quality results when they are responsible for selecting topics, timelines, and methods of their education.

MAKING ACCOUNTING RELEVANT FOR MODERN TIMES

One of the main reasons why student-centered curriculums are so effective is that they modernize and personalize the student's learning experience using various delivery channels. By leveraging the Internet, for example, instructors can connect a classroom via on-line forums and communicate assignments through a class website. The Internet presents a natural point of integration in a student's learning environment as they are already utilizing social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. With social media, educators can encourage active learning, where students can discuss concepts, assignments, and current events with fellow classmates, instructors, or business professionals. This type of social networking has even been successful in promoting mentorships and apprenticeships for students who want to learn more about accounting.

Another way to actively engage students is to incorporate games into accounting courses. Games add some flair to the classroom and help students learn somewhat difficult accounting concepts and financial processes in exciting ways. For example, an instructor may take a classic board game such as "Monopoly" to illustrate accounting transactions. An instructor replaces the paper currency with checks and receipts, and students will record all financial transaction applying accounting principles learned in class. After a certain amount of game time, students would then create financial statements from all the transactions. Games such as "Monopoly" and even "Bingo," where students answer accounting related trivia questions to fill up the spaces on the board, are a fun way to teach and reinforce accounting concepts. By creating a competitive environment, instructors are able to reinforce the concepts in the textbook. Also, for students who are more comfortable working on the computer, instructors can utilize web-based games as an additional avenue for student interaction. For instance, David Marshall's Bean Counter's website, www.dwmbeancounter.com, offers free accounting tutorials, courses, tests and quizzes, and games. Anyone on the site can learn accounting principles through fun games like "Fling the Teacher," "Walk the Plank," or "Teacher Invaders."

In addition to the Internet and games, instructors should also use other media such as current events, movies, television, and documentaries to help bridge real world accounting events to what is taught in textbooks. Over the last decade, short films on Enron and Worldcom peaked students' accounting interest by chronicling scams and fraudulent activity. More recently, the economic problems globally can serve a similar function. Students can read and discuss articles from the Wall Street Journal or watch news clips detailing how poor accounting practices in

the banking and real estate industries contributed to today's economic problems. Using current media such as newspapers and television provides students with additional real-life examples to support the accounting fundamentals learned in class.

A CASE STUDY FROM A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Empirical research indicates that the use of student-centered learning utilizing Internet-based solutions and blended-teaching methods can have a meaningful impact on student performance. In the spring of 2008, a community college decided to implement the course management system called Blackboard for three years, giving 420 students the option to use its added functionality. The Blackboard system basically acts as an extension to the classroom and provides such features as: interactive chapter summaries, posted course materials and announcements, discussion boards, virtual chat sessions with whiteboard functionality, e-mail, a digital drop box for students to review assignments, and submit online assessments.

Prior to implementation of Blackboard, approximately 25-30 percent of the college's students failed and/or withdrew in a typical year. Over the three years with Blackboard, the failure rate dropped to approximately 15 percent or approximately 60 students. Of those 60 students, about 50 students did not interact with the Blackboard system after the second week of the course. Although an ideal experiment would have segregated the students into two groups, a control group using traditional teaching techniques and a test group which used Blackboard, the students' results when compared to prior years dramatically improved. Students who utilized Blackboard tended to be more engaged and active with their professor as well as other classmates, resulting in higher test scores.

In addition to the successes using Blackboard, instructors at the community college also demonstrated positive results by utilizing blended-teaching methods, combining instructor lectures with student activities. During the three year period from the spring 2008 to the spring 2011 semesters, the introductory accounting courses offered four study sessions in addition to the typical lectures. These five hour interactive study sessions were held before both mid-term and final exams. The first half was spent with instructor-driven lectures and reviews of important concepts along with dedicated time for answering specific questions from students. The second half of the sessions consisted of students collaborating with one another while working through two sample problems.

Results from the study sessions for the three years covering an eligible population of 1,749 students suggest a positive benefit to both knowledge and ability levels. There were a total of 528 out of 1,749 students that attended the study sessions. For mid-term exams, 76 percent of the workshop attendees or 401 students received a passing grade, while only 48 percent non-attendees or 586 students received a passing grade. For the final exam, the divergence between the groups was even greater, as 84 percent of attendees or 450 students scored a passing grade, compared to only 36 percent of non-attendees or 436 students. Instructors also observed a benefit to the retention rate of students in the introductory accounting course. Students who attended at least one study session withdrew from the course at a 7 percent rate, compared to the 31 percent rate observed among those who did not attend a session. Qualitative comments from students also indicated they thought the extra study session has benefited their learning and increased their knowledge base.

PUTTING ACCOUNTING INTO PRACTICE

Understanding how accounting interacts with daily life is imperative, especially those looking for careers in the business world. Students will learn that everyone uses accounting principles in their lives, whether formally or informally. Preparing a family budget or even filing a tax return are both examples of accounting put into practice. Instructors can help grow this understanding by relating material to common situations.

By implementing a student-centered approach in the classroom, the hope is to have a self-confident, critical-thinking student who fully understands the terminology and fundamentals of accounting. Only then will students develop an appreciation for the work that accountants perform. A natural progression then is for students to study the roles that accountants play in the marketplace. Ideas to help foster this understanding include job shadowing programs, guest lecturers, interviews with practitioners, creation of news stories, production of video content, and any combinations of these ideas. These assignments will help students learn that accounting is a viable career choice, one that can be personally and professionally rewarding.

CONCLUSION

While many students view accounting as a boring subject, it does not have to be. Instructors need to do more to engage students and prepare them for the rapidly changing business world they will soon enter. By combining traditional teaching methods with student-centered ones, an accounting course can be engaging and exciting. Using this blended-learning approach, students can select topics they are interested in and have more ownership in how they learn the accounting principles and concepts. Instructors need to utilize the Internet and multimedia as avenues to which they can deliver valuable information to students in a way they can understand. By altering the methods in which the content is delivered, instructors can help students view accounting not as boring, but rather as a vital skill that is relevant in their everyday lives.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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