

Student Perceptions of Learning in Accounting

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Abstract

Traditionally, undergraduate accounting courses are lecture-centred and therefore limit the opportunity for students to develop graduate capabilities by engaging in learning from real life experiences (Boyce, Williams, Kelly, & Yee, 2001). Within the context of accounting education, the gap between employer expectations and graduate capabilities has been well documented over the past 20 years (Hancock et al., 2009; Mathews, Jackson, & Brown, 1990) but its resolution seems more elusive than ever (Birrell & Healy, 2008). The nature of accounting education is criticised for being too content and exam driven with most responsibility for content and structure resting with the teaching academic. Such teacher-centred approaches emphasise lower order learning at the expense of higher order thinking and learning and career readiness (Stokes, 2008; Vu, Rigby, & Mather, 2011; Willcoxson, Wynder, & Laing, 2010; Yong, Ryan, Yap, & Goela, 2011). This work-in-progress paper presents some initial findings of learning experiences of students in an undergraduate Bachelor of Commerce program, particularly their graduate capabilities and work readiness. Using evidence from the literature and the findings of student experiences of learning, we argue the need for curriculum renewal in accounting education and for a shift in emphasis from lecture-centred approaches to more student-centred experiential approaches to learning and teaching.

Introduction

Professionals tend to work in environments that continually attract change and innovation (Dunlap, 2005). This is true for accountants also as they are employed in different types of organisations, at every level and assist with various forms of decision-making processes. An accountant engaged in professional practice requires a wide range of skills that extend well beyond technical proficiency and include the ability to plan, analyse, interpret and communicate information for strategic and operational decision making (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008).

Craft (2006) argued that globalisation of economic activity has brought with it an increased competitiveness for markets driving the need to raise the levels of educational achievement of their potential labour forces. Accordingly what is required in terms of academic achievement is changing. It is no longer enough to have depth and grasp of discipline specific technical knowledge. This implies that graduating accountants are required to develop capabilities not only to create new ideas, but also to transform those ideas into new realities thus adding value to the society. Many of the problems faced by accountants include both “hard” (technological) aspects and “soft” (social) aspects.

Traditionally, undergraduate accounting courses are lecture-centred and limit the opportunity for students to develop graduate capabilities by engaging in learning from real life experiences (Boyce, et al., 2001). Within the context of accounting education, the gap between employer expectations and graduate capabilities has been well documented over the past 20 years (Hancock, et al., 2009; Mathews, et al., 1990) but its resolution seems more elusive than ever (Birrell &

Healy, 2008). The nature of accounting education is criticised for being too content and exam driven with most responsibility for content and structure resting with the teaching academic. Such teacher-centred approaches emphasise lower order learning at the expense of higher order thinking and learning and career readiness (Stokes, 2008; Vu, et al., 2011; Willcoxson, et al., 2010; Yong, et al., 2011).

If accounting graduates are to succeed in this changing environment, it is incumbent on the university to prepare them through a variety of learning opportunities. That way students can continue to learn when no longer under the supervision of their lecturers or tutors (Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994a, 1994b). To address these issues accounting curriculum requires major rethinking (Hancock et al., 2009). That is, it requires restructuring of accounting programs, reallocation of teaching and learning resources, and refocusing teaching and learning efforts to strengthen accountants to tackle the challenges of the future.

This work-in-progress paper presents some initial findings of the investigation of the learning experiences of students in an undergraduate Bachelor of Commerce program, particularly their graduate capabilities and work readiness. It is anticipated that student-learning experiences will shed some light into their perception of competence and confidence with the graduate capabilities they have developed through their undergraduate program. Using evidence from the literature and the findings of student experiences of learning, we argue the need for curriculum renewal in accounting education and shift in emphasis from lecture-centred approaches to more student-centred experiential approaches to learning.

Changing Pedagogy in Higher Education

Our understanding of student learning in higher education has developed and transformed through a number of radical studies that investigated deep and surface approaches to learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Biggs & Tang (2011) and Ramsden (2003) argue persuasively that teaching is most effective when it focuses on creating a learning environment that encourages students to adopt a deep approach to learning. This shift in focus from teaching to student learning has been characterised as a paradigm shift in Higher Education (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

Students are more likely to construct meaning and develop understanding of what they are studying when they adopt a deep approach to learning. However, certain characteristics such as students whose focus is to achieve only a minimal pass, may lead to the student adopting a surface approach that is suboptimal. However, the decision to adopt surface approaches to their learning is often encouraged by the teaching and assessments methods. Biggs & Tang (2011) argue that characteristics of teaching and learning situations need to be thoroughly examined. They advocate an approach to teaching based on principles of “constructive alignment” an amalgam of constructivism – building on what students already know and alignment – teaching and assessing what we want our students to demonstrate at the end of a course or unit of study.

Central to constructivism is the notion that knowledge can neither be transmitted nor it can be neutral. Knowledge is always constructed, negotiated and propelled by learning opportunities and perpetuated for as long as it enables its creators to organise their reality in a viable fashion (Laroche & Bednarz, 1998). This has prompted the development of challenging, conceptually sound and methodically rigorous educational situations that stress the need to encourage greater participation by students in their appropriation of scholarly knowledge and graduate capabilities. Successful

achievement of learning outcomes is more likely to result from teaching approaches based on self-directed and peer-assisted (Stroot et al., 1998), experiential and real world learning (Kolb, 2007), problem-based and practice-based learning (Savin-Baden & Major, 2004), reflective practices (Schön, 1983) and critical self-awareness (Ramsden, 2003), that takes into account what students do and not what students are or what teachers do (Biggs & Tang 2011).

Experiential Learning

Conceptions about how students learn in formal academic settings have changed considerably in the past two decades. Experiential learning blurs the difference between learning at a university and learning in the workplace and emphasises learning that is comparable with that encountered in the world of work. A range of experience-led and situated learning models challenge the primary position universities once held on shaping learning through traditional lecture-based teaching and learning approaches such as those used in accounting education. This paradigm shift presents a challenge to the teaching and learning methods in accounting education. A report published by the ALTC in 2009, *Accounting for the future: more than numbers*, identified the technical and non-technical skills required of graduates moving forward as well as the deficiencies in skills that graduates possess (Hancock, et al., 2009).

In recent years, the term ‘career ready graduates’ has gained momentum as employers, government and universities increasingly emphasise the need for a skilled workforce (Smith, 2012). The most popular response to these demands is a focus on ‘work-integrated learning’ (WIL), described by Smith (2012, p. 248) as a “strategic way for institutions to respond to the demands of the ‘enterprise’ culture that places pressure on higher education institutions to produce graduates who are ‘work ready’”. However, WIL is usually limited to one course within a program and is neither appropriate nor affordable (Patrick et al., 2008). Additionally, the current emphasis on WIL has overshadowed other forms of teaching and learning with similar objectives to WIL such as problem-based and experiential learning.

The University of Newcastle has been working towards enhancing the quality of its graduates and improving their overall learning experiences through a number of initiatives. Creating career ready graduates is a focus of the University of Newcastle with the university stating “WIL should be available for all undergraduate students, should provide a meaningful and relevant experience, and should be recognised through assessment and credit” (The University of Newcastle, 2012).

The implementation of WIL has been problematic for a number of reasons including cost, recruitment, management of employer groups and providing fair opportunities to students. At the University of Newcastle WIL is only offered as an opportunity to high achieving students with the majority of the cohort missing out. WIL therefore discriminates against lower achieving students. Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that, in fact we should be providing more learning opportunities to less than high achieving students.

We are therefore currently undertaking a review that focuses on embedding graduate capabilities through experiential learning opportunities in accounting courses. Our review must take into account the characteristics of our students, their learning experiences, key graduate attributes, the design and implementation of accounting courses and the way it is mapped within a program. Our aim is to develop experiential learning opportunities within the accounting major in the Bachelor of Commerce program consistent with the University’s policy and focus on creating career ready graduates. Advocating for experiential learning, Biggs (2012) argues that deeper and more practical learning arises from constructing

learning situations that resemble the workplace. As a result students do not have to wait until they are employed or engaged in WIL opportunities to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting.

Research Design

We intend to explore experiential learning models in higher education including the use of case-based, scenario-based, problem-based and practice-based approaches to teaching to develop graduate capabilities. This may not only overcome problems that are inherent in WIL, but also prepare graduates to become career ready by experiencing real-world learning early in the undergraduate accounting program. This section explores the design of our study that investigates the usefulness of experiential learning in accounting education, its design and implementation in undergraduate courses and its benefits for student learning and development.

Methodology

While there is established literature on student learning in accounting education, there are limited qualitative studies that explore learning experiences of students. Most literature focuses on student learning approaches and employer expectations ignoring how graduate capabilities may be developed and progressed through active and experiential learning approaches to teaching (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008).

Therefore, our project explores student perceptions of learning experiences in accounting courses. We aim to inform curriculum renewal in accounting education by collecting and analysing learning, teaching and assessment methods that engage students in learning experientially. Our approach to do this is twofold.

Firstly, we investigated student learning experiences, and their perceptions of the graduate capabilities that they have achieved by undertaking study in accounting courses at the University of Newcastle. Secondly, we will approach selected academics who have incorporated active and experiential learning in their accounting curriculum to study the design of courses and its implementation by observing them in their classroom. In this paper we report some initial findings from student focus groups.

We conducted focus group interviews with students in their final year of the Bachelor of Commerce program with a major in Accounting at the University of Newcastle. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to gain student perceptions of learning experience in accounting courses. Students were asked about their overall learning experiences, and to provide examples of some of the classroom-based activities including teaching and assessment activities, that promoted the development of key graduate capabilities. The focus group interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

In order to analyse the data from students interview, the transcripts of interviews were summarised. Summaries from various focus group interviews were coded and major themes were identified. The codes were matched with the raw data to interpret emerging findings. The findings of this analysis are presented in this section (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Analysis of Findings

The findings are grouped according to the themes: work readiness; graduate capabilities; and learning experience.

Work Readiness

Although students were close to the end of their degree, they felt underprepared and did not know what was required of them in ‘the job’. They reported a lack of practical experience incorporated in accounting courses in their Bachelor of Commerce program and expressed concern about whether the knowledge that they were learning in class was relevant to practice. For example:

“The bridge is not built between the university and actual work. There is no bridge there. You’ve got to jump.”

“It comes back to the idea of you know, in second year nursing, (students) are in hospitals, and second year accountants are at home reading a textbook learning how to reference.”

“We are here getting a piece of paper we have been told we need to get before you do the job but we are not actually learning to do anything that involves the job.”

Graduate Capabilities

Students also reported on the development of graduate capabilities such as communication, problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork and ethical awareness. Some students felt that some graduate capabilities, for example written communication, problem solving, critical thinking and ethical awareness were covered to various degrees in their courses; however, they reported a lack of confidence in demonstrating these capabilities. They also felt verbal communication and the ability to work in a team were inadequately developed. For example:

“I think we have covered very little but again written communication...I think the biggest thing that isn’t really taught is verbal communication very much”

“I think there needs to be more group work and more presentations and courses specific, that’s the key, as you mentioned the criteria the employers want, but we don’t really get taught how to do it specifically.”

Learning Experience

Students indicated overall that the learning experience was good for learning the fundamental technical knowledge and liked courses that involved practical case-based or scenario-based approaches to learning. They reported such

experiences were interesting and practical, however overall they found the program lacked relevance in terms of what they were learning. Students also indicated that learning related to experience is not common in most courses. For example:

"In some courses the lecturer might provide a scenario for a question. I find that really interesting and useful and I feel that will benefit me and kind of putting my mindset into this idea that I am the accountant and I have got to figure this out."

"I think it is hard to know what's important from what you learn in courses, like you don't know what you are actually going to use"

"It's just that there are some things that you just think why am I going to use all my time for this when you could be doing something a lot more practical that would be helping me a lot more for what I want to do."

Discussion and Conclusion

This work-in-progress paper set out to explore student learning experiences in accounting from their viewpoint and identify key themes from both literature and students that inform the need for curriculum renewal in accounting. In particular, this study investigated key graduate capabilities through their accounting courses, their work readiness and their overall learning experiences. It was found that most students were underprepared and lacked confidence in many of the capabilities that are expected of graduates.

Such a finding is in line with what has been established in previous accounting education literature (Hancock, et al., 2009). There is documented evidence that employers think graduates are not career ready (Patrick, et al., 2008). This gap prompted the need for qualitative research into student experiences of learning in accounting and the use of active and experiential learning approaches to encourage students to adopt a deep approach to learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Hence, focus group interviews were used as the method of data collection for the first stage of this study. The second stage of this study will involve ethnographic observations of experiential learning and teaching strategies in classrooms to examine its design and implementation through individual interviews with academics.

We anticipate that this will lead to further qualitative research into student learning approaches, and the development and progression of key graduate capabilities within the program. If we want our students to succeed in their careers, we then have the obligation to teach and help them develop key graduate capabilities. Doing so will not only empower our students to become future leaders and contributors in our discipline but also provide us with a sense of accomplishment.

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Biography

Adrian Melia

Adrian has been employed as a lecturer in Accounting and Finance at various universities in Sydney, Australia in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs from 2003 to 2010. Since 2011 Adrian has been employed as a lecturer in Accounting and Finance at the University of Newcastle, Australia. He is responsible for curriculum and assessment development and design, as well as the management and delivery of courses in Accounting and Finance in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

Adrian is currently undertaking a teaching and learning research project in the area of experiential learning. The aim of the research is to explore its use in higher education and analyse student perceptions of experiential learning at the

University of Newcastle. This will inform the design and implementation of experiential learning opportunities in accounting education early within the program.

Biography

Dr Siva Krishnan

Siva commenced employment at the Centre for Teaching and Learning in 2009 as Lecturer, Curriculum Design and Development. Prior to this Siva was employed at Victoria University's School of Electrical Engineering (2003 - 2006) and School of Education (2008 - 2009). He also brings on board the experience from his employment at two multinational engineering organisations and a major Australian financial institution. Siva's doctoral thesis "Student Experiences of Problem-Based Learning in Engineering: Learning cultures in PBL teams" investigated the experiences of first year engineering students to a newly implemented engineering problem-based learning (PBL) curriculum at Victoria University; its effects on their approaches to learning and their learning outcomes. Using ethnographic approaches to data collection and analysis, he explored the attitudes, behaviour and learning approaches of individuals in PBL teams and its effects on their team's learning culture with an emphasis on "what students learn" and "how they respond to the various learning opportunities" from a student view point. The findings of this study were instrumental in bringing about improvements to the design of engineering courses and the way they are implemented in the classroom. Siva's current research explores the practice and scholarship of higher education teaching and learning and student engagement strategies. Prior to entering academia 9 years ago, Adrian worked in the area of Management Consulting for a global Management Consulting group for government and financial services clients. Adrian was also employed by one of Australia's leading banks in financial services for a number of years, where he worked as a financial analyst.