

# Leaping over the perceptual threshold in accounting courses: embracing sustainable assessment and learning design

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Introductory accounting subjects are characterised by certain topics which have traditionally proven challenging for students, and this has often resulted in negative perceptions within the discipline (Weil, 1989; Sharma, 1997; Lucas, 2000, 2001; Mladenovic, 2000; Lucas & Mladenovic, 2006). Accounting educators need to embrace innovative means of assessment that challenge preconceptions of the discipline, and encourage students to develop strong interpersonal and analytical skills to promote sustainable learning outcomes. Drawing on reflective educational theory, this paper describes the introduction of a reflective journaling exercise in a business information course within an accounting program. The exercise was designed to increase student engagement with course-related material and assist in the development of transferable learning skills. The paper describes the context within which the research took place, the nature of the course, its learning objectives and educational philosophy, and details of the reflective journal assessment. The reflective journals and essays of 131 students were coded using five categories of advantages derived from the literature. Extracts of individual reflective essays provide insight into students' perceptions of the usefulness of the learning exercise. The findings of the study suggest that accounting educators can use this learning resource to address negative preconceptions, engage learners and assist in the development of transferable skills such as critical reflection, self-motivation, learning ownership and meta-cognition.

**Keywords:** accounting education; embedding generic learning skills; innovative assessment; reflective journaling; student perceptions

**Theme:** assessment for sustainable learning within and beyond the course

## Introduction

The professional environment in which accountants operate has become increasingly complex in recent years, leading to significant changes within the profession. Increasing pressure is being placed on the accountant to provide a service that encompasses a broader community responsibility (International Federation of Accountants, 2003). Intensifying this change are the pressures associated with the recent global financial crisis, changes in information and communication technology and the continuous introduction of newly issued accounting standards

(Samkin & Francis, 2008). The accounting profession is calling for enhanced ‘employability’ skills – such as analytical and critical analysis and the ability to communicate and engage with clients – to be embedded within current graduates (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Gordon & Debus, 2002; Hall, Ramsay & Ravan, 2004; Rodrigues, 2004; Cope & Staehr, 2005; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; McGuigan & Kern, 2009; Hancock et al., 2010). This position has been summarised in a US report compiled by Robert Half International Inc:

To succeed in tomorrow’s accounting, finance and audit environments, [Financial Leadership Council] members said professionals need a wider range of skills than at any time in recent memory. Well-developed financial and technology abilities remain essential, but strong interpersonal and analytical skills are increasingly crucial for success ...

There is a growing body of literature within accounting education that describes introductory accounting courses as being delivered to large student cohorts in the first year of study, comprising multiple areas of interest and following an often standardised curriculum dominated by the requirements of the accounting profession, prescribed technically based textbooks and reinforced through traditional methods of assessment (Zeff, 1989; Mladenovic 2000; Lucas, 2002; Leveson, 2004; Lucas & Mladenovic, 2006, 2007; Weil & McGuigan, 2010). Notwithstanding this, the study of introductory accounting has traditionally proved challenging to students, with the discipline perceived as boring and with an emphasis on numbers and mathematical formulae (Weil, 1989; Gow, Kember & Cooper, 1994; Mladenovic, 2000; Lucas, 2000; 2001; Lucas & Meyer, 2005; Lucas & Mladenovic, 2006). Consequently, learners fail to fully comprehend the role accounting plays within a ‘real-world’ context, where there are varying degrees of subjectivity.

Drawing on threshold concept theory (Meyer & Land, 2006a and b), this paper argues that students’ preconceptions of the accounting discipline form a major ‘perceptual threshold’ in their learning. This threshold needs to be crossed, explored and overcome in order for the learner to acquire a level of understanding beyond the superficial (McGuigan & Kern, 2009; McGuigan & Weil, 2010). To achieve this, educators need to embrace innovative means of assessment design that challenge student preconceptions of the discipline and address the development of strong interpersonal and analytical skills in order to promote sustainable learning outcomes among accounting students.

This paper aims to address these concerns by describing the implementation of reflective learning journals in a first-year accounting decision-making course. This form of assessment was used both to promote change in students’ negative preconceptions of the accounting discipline and to enhance the development of transferable learning skills in accounting graduates. Reflective journalling enables students to become aware of and to critically assess both their learning process and the course material presented (Bonk & Smith, 1998; Moon, 1999a, 1999b, 2004). This innovative assessment method was used to assist in the facilitation of key transferable skills such as critical thinking, reflective practice, professional development, written communication, meta-cognitive skills and active ownership of learning among students. This enhanced skills development further promotes a sustainable learning approach that has application in future areas of academic study and within professional employment.

## Research methodology

Financial Information for Business is taught in the first year of a business degree at Lincoln University in New Zealand. The course is a core subject within the commerce degree program. The aims of the course, which focuses primarily on decision-user appreciation of financial statements, are to provide an understanding of the basic concepts underpinning the preparation and analysis of financial reports and to apply these concepts to the interpretation and management of accounting data.

The self-reflection activity was introduced into the course in order to allow students the opportunity to reflect on their learning process in accounting, providing a contextual basis for reflection in the hope that they would develop a deeper and more critical understanding of accounting and its subjective characteristics. The learning journal had two components: a weekly reflective journal and a single written assignment comprising 10 per cent of the student's overall course grade.

Students were required, in their first week of lectures, to identify two learning goals that they would like to achieve by completing the course. An individual reflective learning journal was to be maintained throughout the semester. The journal design required students to compose a contribution at the end of each week that comprised both a personal reflection on their experience in the educational setting and a discussion of how this might relate to their external environment, including their family, personal finances, business practices and so on.

Journal entries were required at the end of each week, in order to distance students from their immediate setting and therefore encourage more reflection on key issues (Uline, Wilson & Cordry, 2004). Students were provided with guidance documentation illustrating a theoretical framework within which to reflect: describe the experience, analyse it, create enhanced meaning and action for future learning (Moon, 1999a; Kennison & Misselwitz, 2002). There was no formal grade assigned to the learning journal, in order to limit any restrictions that formal assessment might place on the students' free development of thought and on the learning process (Moon, 1999a, 1999b, 2004).

The second component of the activity required students to submit a reflective essay, comprising 10 per cent of their coursework grade, that reviewed their identified learning goals, reflective journal and overall progress within the course. This assignment required students to provide a summary of their learning through the course, using their journal entries as a foundation. The essay design gave the students an opportunity for secondary reflective analysis, allowing even deeper reflection on their learning over the entire course (Moon 2004).

The written assignment was presented to students as being similar in nature and purpose to a financial statement. A financial statement offers insight into an organisation's financial position, clearly depicting its assets, liabilities and resulting net wealth. Similarly, the reflective essay was designed to provide students with insight into their individual learning position, clearly illustrating their journey of learning within the course, their current progress and any aspirations for future academic study, in an attempt to build transferable learning skills that could be applied to higher-level study.

The primary objective of the study was to evaluate the usefulness of reflective journalling in developing transferable learning skills, as perceived by the students. To achieve this, 131 student reflection essays were analysed, using five classifications of reflective journalling benefits derived from the reviewed literature. The five classifications were: relevance and relation; self-direction and self-assessment; anchor learning; personal attributes; and improved communication. Two main stages of analysis were undertaken. The first comprised students' essays being read and coded in accordance with the five derived classifications. The second involved the collation of these coded comments in order to provide each criterion with a rank of student-perceived usefulness.

### **Preliminary findings**

The findings of this exploratory study provided confirmation of the advantages found in the literature: enhancing personal attributes, self-direction and self-assessment and ensuring the course's relevance (Woodward, 1998; Moon, 1999b; Varner & Peck, 2003). This was indicated by 85.5 per cent of students commenting on the enhancement of their personal attributes, and 84.0 per cent discussing enhanced relevance and relation to the course learning material. The criterion of relevance and relation included advantages such as supporting understanding and the representation of understanding, increasing the relevance of course material to students and enhancing student engagement. As one student commented:

From what I have learnt in this subject I will be able to apply it when I go home and take over the farm. Budgeting will be a very important factor as will calculating my performance. The knowledge I have of accounting while not extensive will greatly help me in the future.

Self-direction and self-assessment-related advantages include providing continuous feedback, increasing active involvement and ownership of learning, and focusing learning. As one student commented:

Weekly diaries meant I have been able to note problems throughout the course, and as a result, remedy these problems by asking other students at workshops or asking the workshop tutor.

Further support was found in the analysis of total student comments, with nearly one third relating both to personal attributes and relevance and relation, and one quarter to self-direction and self-assessment. Based on the total number of student essays, this shows that each student made on average almost two comments about the improvement of personal attributes and relevance and relation. This indicates strong support for the use of learning journals to enhance students' learning ability through the development of personal attributes and to ensure the relevance of course content (Woodward, 1998; Moon 1999b, 2004). Furthermore, the findings showed that one quarter of student comments refer to self-direction and self-assessment, providing support for the notion that learning journals provide students with a means to take ownership and responsibility of their learning (Varner & Peck, 2003).

The least perceived advantages of journalling, as evidenced through student comments, were anchoring learning (25.2 per cent) and improved communication (18.3 per cent). One student commented with regard to anchoring of their learning that:

learning about the collapse of Enron really intrigued me and especially helped me realise the relevance and effects of accounting to business and the world.

Another student made the following statement with regard to improved communication:

I have gained many benefits from writing these journal entries as I can clearly see, in hindsight, how my writing has changed to indicate points in a clearer way. I believe this has told me something about my thinking process in this course as things seem to be a lot clearer.

The study also indicated a positive change in students' perceptions of the course and of accounting as a discipline. Fifty-six students (43 per cent) commented at least once on a positive change in their original views in relation to the course and/or to accounting as a discipline. Examples of students' comments included:

The original perception I had of accounting and finance was that it was for boring people. However, this is not true at all. I have found it very interesting.

At the beginning of the semester I came into accounting and finance for business with a huge preconception that the course would be very dry and math focused. I did not imagine that in the end I would actually enjoy learning about accounting.

The preliminary results provided above indicate a noticeably positive change in students' perceptions of accounting and an enhancement of their learning skills. This indicates that reflective journalling is a powerful learning tool that accounting educators can use to address preconceptions, engage learners and assist in the development of enhanced transferable skills such as critical reflection, self-motivation, learning ownership and meta-cognition, which students can transfer to higher-level study.

## **Conclusion**

This paper describes the successful implementation of a reflective journalling assessment that challenges more traditional forms of accounting assessment within a first-year accounting decision-making course. The reflective journal and written essay tool have enabled continuing reflective practice to occur within the course, allowing students to develop sustainable learning skills that can be transferred to higher-level study.

The overall findings of the study support the assertion by Woodward (1998), Varner and Peck (2003) and Moon (1999b, 2004) that reflective journalling can promote the development of a students' personal attributes, self-direction and self-assessment, and ensure that the learning in a course is of relevance. This has resulted in the ability of students to confront and address their negative preconceptions of the accounting discipline while enhancing the development of their learning skills. This was best summarised by the following comment within one student's reflective essay:

I felt this [reflective exercise] was a positive way to engage students in the course and make them accountable for their learning progress. It has been a constructive exercise to ... reflect on learning progress and how my initial thoughts of accounting have developed. At the start of this course I feared going to an accounting lecture as it was all about numbers, but the numbers are a small part; accounting requires analysis and professional judgement where there is no real answer to accounting.

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