

What turns you on? An action research approach to identifying first year Students' perspectives on engagement

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Abstract:

This 'nuts and bolts' presentation intends to explore student perspectives of their engagement within a first year accounting and finance course. The presentation has been based around the action research model described by Cardno/Piggot-Irvine (1994) to include three stages reconnaissance, intervention and evaluation. It is envisaged that the presentation will explore each of these research cycles illustrating how the problem of student re-engagement in a first year decision making course, Acct 102, Accounting and Finance for Business was explored. This presentation initially describes the course context, including the nature of the course, its learning objectives, its educational philosophy and student composition. An explanation of an innovative teaching resource, a custom designed Intelligent Tutoring System, is then provided.

The Course

Acct 102, Accounting and Finance for Business, is taught in the first year of a business degree at Lincoln University, New Zealand. The course is mandatory for all accounting majors who wish to satisfy the requirements of the New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants (NZICA)² and is also a core paper within the commerce degree programme. The aims of the course, which focuses primarily on a decision-user appreciation of financial reports, are to provide an understanding of the basic concepts underpinning the preparation and analysis of accounting reports and to apply these concepts to the interpretation and management of accounting data.

As Acct 102 is mandatory in the commerce degree, the course is run three times per annum; once in each semester and in January summer school. Approximately 600 students enrol in the course each year, with a roughly equal gender split and an increasing number of mature learners. The student composition can be classified into three main groups, namely, agricultural and life science students, students enrolled for other major areas of study and accounting major students. Most of the students in the course are international students, including those enrolling in an accounting major.

The student diversity in Acct 102 presents challenges for the teaching staff to cater adequately for the varying needs of all students. The student cohort that is currently emerging at first-year university level can be defined as an independent, informal, innovative, assertive, technologically-minded collection of young individuals known as generation Y (Sheahan, 2005). Demographers refer to generation Y as being defined by birth dates between 1978 and 1994. According to Sheahan (2005), the Y generation has advanced knowledge of the practical applications of technology which is used in many aspects of life. He further asserts

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² The New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants (NZICA) is the professional accreditation body for chartered accountants in New Zealand.

that this generation is addicted to entertainment and stimulation that occur in a highly-visual, interactive environment. Combining education and entertainment in a learning situation engages these students, increasing both retention and the level of skills transfers (Sheahan, 2005). This challenge was met by employing a teaching philosophy that is active in nature, whereby students are engaged in an integrative and interactive classroom environment (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 2003). According to Faust and Paulson (1998), an active classroom is one in which students learn through diverse means, engaging in the course, rather than listening passively to an instructor's lecture. The course assessment supports this teaching philosophy, providing students with the opportunity to build on their knowledge of course material through formative assessment practices, such as the development of business proposals and reports, which progress towards summative pieces of work (Race, 1996). The integrative nature of the course is developed by the completion of an evidence portfolio, which is applied to an integrative case study and linked to the final examination.

Acct 102 is delivered through a mixture of interactive lectures, workshops and assigned readings, all of which support the course content. Interactive lectures are presented three times a week to provide a structure to student learning, covering key concepts and issues, encouraging class discussion and conducting in-class group activities. In this way, lectures serve more as "lectorials" than as a more traditional lecture presentation (Race, 1994). Workshops are conducted on a weekly basis to support this teaching programme by offering a smaller group meeting, in which discussion focuses on an industry perspective case study relevant to the prior week's learning material.

Session Plan:

The 'nuts and bolts' presentation has been based around the action research model described by Cardno/Piggot-Irvine (1994); 'reconnaissance of the problem situation, intervention and evaluation of intervention'. It is envisaged that the presentation will explore each of these research cycles mapping audience discussion and interaction to the problem of re-engagement in a first year decision making course, acct 102.

Time	Description	Resources
5 mins	<p>Reconnaissance – Provide a background description of the course, diversity of student composition (Sheahan, 2005), discipline, evidence collected:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official course evaluations • Prior lecturer and tutor observations • Grade distributions • Lincoln University student magazine 'rough guide to lectures' comments • Lecturer administered surveys <p>All evidence led to the development of the teaching staff action research question 'how to re-engage our students with their first year experience in acct 102?'</p>	<p>PowerPoint Presentation</p> <p>Examples of student feedback and comments will be flashed through the presentation in a newspaper headline fashion.</p> <p>Grade distributions for the period 1996 – 2006 will be graphed to illustrate an issue that we faced.</p>
4 mins	<p>Audience brainstorm In groups of three the audience have a chance to discuss these issues and come up with others that maybe found in a course of a similar nature (compulsory with non-major first year students) within their own institutions.</p>	Handout
4 mins	<p>Discussion on relevance and applicability to industry and student lives. We found that often a number of these problems can be overcome through interaction and realism within a student's life. For example:</p>	Demonstration of practical tools utilised

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://sorted.co.nz • video clips on manufacturing • industry perspective workshops 	
5 mins	Brainstorm extended Within previous groups try to think about various ways in which course material can be presented to students in a way which reflects their lives or industry practice.	Handout
7 mins	Intervention – A presentation detailing what was planned and implemented to try to re-engage the students within the course. Namely; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • StudyTXT • Intelligent Tutoring System (ITS) developed for capital investment decision making • Industry perspective workshops • Discussion forums • Interactive lectures • Online office hours • Work portfolios A handout will be provided to audience members providing details on each area of change and how these were achieved. A map on the reverse side will clearly illustrate the research cycle implemented.	Powerpoint Presentation Handout
7 mins	Demonstration Intelligent Tutoring System a recently introduced teaching resource innovation will be demonstrated by presenters to see how this resource modernised a very traditional means of learning and resulted in a keen interest from students.	PowerPoint Presentation Internet
5 mins	Evaluation of Intervention – Conclusion will be provided which details initial findings and a brief description of 'where to next' will be given.	PowerPoint Presentation
5 mins	Questions An opportunity for participants to ask questions related to the presentation	

Teaching resource innovation

To extend the interaction and engagement that occur within the classroom and tutorial meetings, as well as to support off-campus learning, a new teaching resource, namely an Intelligent Tutoring System (ITS), has recently been implemented in the course. The ITS designed for ACCT 102: Accounting and Finance for Business is a computer system providing students with an enhanced problem-solving tool to be able to apply theoretical material in a 'real-life' simulated environment.

Learners are provided with capital investment decision problems modelled on real life occurrences in modern business practice. Students' are then asked to provide relevant solutions and evidence to reinforce their selected outcome. ITS offers students' personalised feedback catered towards their particular level and ability. It is for this reason that the tutoring system will assist in motivating students in their learning, presenting feedback at each crucial step of the learning process.

This tool was employed as its innovative and engaging nature maps the educational rationale and the teaching philosophy on which the course is based.

References

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