

Building, Maintaining, and Enhancing Consistency and Cross-Sectional Quality in Multi-Instructor Integrated Principles of Accounting Courses with a Significant Case-Based Component: Investments in Content, Coordination, and Infrastructure

I. INTRODUCTION

Accounting is indeed at a crossroads which some have described as a crisis (Gabbin 2002; Albrecht and Sack 2000). The stature of accounting in the eyes of the public and even within colleges of business has declined in recent years. Where is the best place to start to attempt to reverse this trend? One approach is focusing on the introductory principles of accounting course sequence.

The benefits of focusing on the principles of accounting courses include the opportunity to set the tone for all business and accounting students. By developing integrated and critical thinking skills in students at this level, in part through substantive case analysis, even more significant learning can occur in later business and accounting courses. Often, accounting instructors are able to inspire the best students to become accounting majors through the integrative, experiential, and constructivist learning which is the new model for the accounting principles courses.

In many institutions there are many sections of the principles of accounting courses. A variety of teachers (full-time faculty, part-time instructors, and doctoral students) may be assigned these courses. Building, maintaining, and enhancing consistency and cross-sectional quality is a difficult but important challenge. Experience has shown that success requires a significant investment in content development, coordination, and infrastructure. The key focus of this paper is a description of the investments in coordination, content development, and infrastructure which were required for success over four years of experience with the new principles of accounting courses. Achievement of ambitious student learning outcomes has improved and continues to improve in the spirit of continuous quality improvement envisioned by accrediting bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) and the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC).

II. CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

In order to accomplish the course objectives, it is important that students develop the ability to learn how to learn. This role is in keeping with the position taken by the AECC that the overriding objective of accounting programs should be to teach students to learn on their own. The AECC has also suggested that students must be active participants in the learning process, not passive recipients of information. In terms of learning modes, a feature of this course is that students are engaged in various active learning exercises, both in and out of the classroom. This approach facilitates the students' self-discovery of relevant concepts.

The basic structure of the revised principles of accounting courses is to focus on operational decision making in the first course and investing and financing decision making in the second course. This required the selection of text and other materials which supported this view. Ainsworth et al. (1997 and later 2000) was selected for this purpose. Yet there was still a need for students to apply the concepts discussed in class and in text materials. This required the creation of a series of interrelated cases to which the students could relate. In the first course, the cases related to students starting up a business and dealing with issues of forecasting sales, budgeting cash flow, dealing with inventory and equipment alternatives, and understanding why cash flow was different from accrual-based income. In the second course, a student had won the lottery and had to make choices of receiving a lump sum or an annuity, and later issues of how to invest the proceeds, including stock investment analysis and acquisition of financing for a home for a parent.

Developing these cases, suggested solutions, and a grading rubric required a substantial investment of time and creativity. Furthermore, in order to prevent solutions from "getting out" yet still providing students with valuable feedback, the parameters and structural changes had to be made to the cases each term.

III. COORDINATION

Successful coordination requires significant leadership from the department chair and dean. Change is likely to be resisted. A clear commitment by the department chair and dean led allowed this new approach to become institutionalized in the midst of student and instructor resistance. There must be an empowered coordinator to handle the many tasks required to build, maintain, and enhance consistency and quality across instructors and sections.

Key elements included the following:

1. common midterm exams and a common final exam
2. common learning objectives, syllabi, assignment schedule, and grading criteria
3. common case components and case quizzes
4. common and well-defined policies statement
5. an accounting lab staffed by trained graduate students
6. extensive use of WebCT and course web sites for communication and collaboration, online quizzing, and dissemination of information, including ongoing feedback and evaluation from students
7. Training and monitoring of instructors, particularly those new to the course.

This type of coordination requires much time, skill, dedication, and a reduced teaching load. Without such an investment, meaningful consistency and cross-section quality are unlikely to occur.

IV: INFRASTRUCTURE

Using technology is part of adapting to the changing world. But using technology just to be using technology is foolish. All students are required to have access to reliable internet connections, hardware, and Microsoft Office software. Students are required to understand how to use the online course support platform adopted by the school, namely WebCT. But there must be substantial staff support for handling technological problems of both students and faculty. Classrooms must have internet connections for the instructor workstations and projection equipment to make use of the technology second nature to the students. These investments are not cheap, but they have made significant differences in student learning outcomes. There is instructor buy in and growth. There has been significant progress toward the AECC goal.

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