

USING STUDENT-CENTERED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS TO INTRODUCE STUDENTS TO ACCOUNTING RESEARCH AND FACILITATE INTERACTION WITH ACCOUNTING PRACTITIONERS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I describe two research papers that I use when I teach financial auditing. The first paper requires students to critique articles from a practitioner journal and an academic journal. The second paper requires that students interview an accounting practitioner using questions they developed from the first paper. I describe why I believe these papers are an innovation, what their educational benefits are, and how the papers would be easy to adapt by other educational institutions or to other situations. The research papers have been implemented in my auditing classes, and have been well received by my students and interviewees. Excerpts from my syllabus regarding the two papers are included.

INTRODUCTION

Both practitioners and academics acknowledge the importance of writing skills to accounting professionals and the importance of the accounting curricula that emphasize written communication skills (Ashton, 2004; Reinstein et al., 1999). For example, the AICPA revised the Uniform CPA Examination to assess writing skills (VanZante, 1994). Neller-moe et al. (1999) find that accounting practitioners spend about one third of their time on writing activities. A joint study of the Institute of Management Accountants and the Financial Executives Institute also stressed the importance of accounting educators teaching writing skills (Siegel and Sorensen, 1994). In a recent survey of accounting professionals, writing skills ranked third in importance (out of 19), but eighteenth in terms of the effectiveness of the business curriculum for developing those skills (Ulrich et al., 2003). Similarly, employers of MBA graduates from prestigious programs gave the majority of their new hires poor grades for oral and written communications skills (Barr and Harris,

1997). This is particularly alarming when considering that a company with 5,000 employees typically produces 78 written communications per minute (Ashton, 2004)!

The purpose of this paper is to describe two writing assignments that I have developed and used in the classroom to introduce students to accounting research. These assignments also are useful for developing students' critical thinking skills, as well as written and oral communication skills; and facilitate their interaction with accounting practitioners. These assignments respond to the 1990 report of the Accounting Education Change Commission that states written and oral communication skills and critical thinking skills are necessary for accounting graduates to become successful professionals (AECC, 1990). In addition, these assignments enhance students' auditing knowledge through a combination of their research and interviews with practitioners. I am not aware of other accounting professors that have taken this approach, particularly with regard to the interviews.

The assignments are consistent with an active student-centered learning approach (Huba and Freed, 2000; Levenson 2004) or constructivist learning approach (Molenda, 2002), in that students are engaged in finding their own research articles, developing questions about what they have learned, and finding a working professional to interview. The professor acts as a facilitator in this process by taking a consultative teaching approach (Bonk and Smith, 1998). For example, the instructor may suggest potential sources of information for the students to consider or questions they may wish to ask a professional. However, the learning process is primarily the students' responsibility and they must make their own choices about how to conduct their research, including the sources of information they consult and the questions they choose to ask.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Written Communication Skills

The bulk of previous accounting research shows that writing assignments can improve accounting students' written communication skills and also may help students learn accounting (e.g., Stout et al., 1991; Bird et al., 1998). Stout and DaCrema (2004), for example, describe an intervention that is successful for teaching students about faulty modifiers, a common grammatical problem. In addition, Stout and DaCrema (2005) have developed a writing-improvement module to enhance accounting students written communication skills. Moreover, Reinstein and Houston (2004) used the Securities and Exchange Commission's (SEC) handbook, "A Plain English Handbook: How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents" (SEC 1998) to improve the flow of accounting students' papers. Finally, Cleaveland and Larkins (2004) demonstrated that using web-based instruction and self-tests improved accounting students' writing skills in three areas: (1) passive voice, (2) punctuation, and (3) wordiness.

Critical Thinking Skills

Manninen (1995) describes a three-stage framework (ontological, epistemological, numerical) students can use to critically evaluate articles in the popular press that contain accounting concepts and data. Kealy et al. (2005) used a required writing assignment to investigate whether critical thinking skills were associated with accounting student performance. Student essays on the declining stock price of a company were used to calculate students' critical thinking scores. Students were required to identify factors that may have had a negative effect on investors' views of the company. Students' critical thinking scores were significantly correlated with their performance in

an accounting principles course, demonstrating the relevance of critical thinking for accounting majors.

Moreover, English et al. (2004) used a writing intervention to encourage accounting students to use deep-learning approaches. The intervention included tutorials on writing skills such as critiquing written answers and answering discussion questions. Students were then given writing assignments and given points for content and evidence of critical thinking. Students who received the intervention showed higher scores for deep strategy and deep motive, and lower scores for surface strategy.

Research Skills

Although there have been some case studies developed that require accounting students to conduct research in the library and on the internet (e.g. Houston and Howard, 2000), relatively little previous accounting research has been aimed at improving accounting students' research skills (see Paisey and Paisey, 2004 and Watson et al., 2007 for recent reviews of accounting education literature). However, although action research is primarily aimed at continuously improving the teaching methods of accounting educators, it may also be useful for enhancing accounting students' knowledge acquisition. Action research includes the following stages: identifying a problem, collecting data, reflection, implementing change, and monitoring and evaluating that change. Action research projects have been used as a means to encourage introductory level accounting students to examine source documents such as accounting standards (Paisey and Paisey, 2005), and advanced level honors accounting students to consult scholarly articles (Paisey and Paisey, 2003), as well as enhance accounting educators' teaching effectiveness.

RESEARCH PAPERS

I have used the research papers in a senior level financial auditing course for several years. They are part of a series of six writing assignments I use, and are worth 10% of students' overall grades. The first paper asks students to critique two articles on an auditing topic of their choice. Students must choose one article from a list of practitioner journals (see Appendix), and one from a list of academic journals (see Appendix). The student must state the objective of each article, how the author attempted to achieve this objective, whether the objective was achieved, and the importance of the article. The student also must point out at least one strength and weakness of each article, and how the article relates to issues that we have discussed in the course, including the chapter and page numbers from the textbook if applicable. *Most importantly*, students must compare the two articles to each other, and develop one to three questions from each article that they would like to ask an auditing professional. Students are encouraged to ask probing questions (Cottell and Millis, 1993) by thinking about what was missing or unclear from the article and how interviewing a practitioner could help them fill in the blanks or add clarification. This exercise is consistent with using critiques to enhance students' critical thinking skills (Bonk and Smith, 1998). Grading is based on whether the objective of the article has been correctly identified, whether the student has identified important strengths and weaknesses of the article, and whether they have been able to develop insightful questions. Organization, grammar and spelling are also important.

The process of developing their own questions forces students to think critically about each article they have read. For example, they may ask a practitioner to compare their own experiences to the findings or conclusions of the research. Examples of the topics of students' papers and the questions they have developed are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
A Sample of Student Topics & Questions

Topics

Audit Committees
Professional Ethics & Auditor Independence
Government Regulation & Sarbanes-Oxley
Internal Controls & COSO
Disclosure of Material Weaknesses & Remediation of Controls
Fraud
Partner Rotation
Earnings Management
Mergers and Acquisitions

Questions

1. Do you believe that stricter government regulations like Sarbanes-Oxley are producing benefits that outweigh their costs?
2. Is there a point at which more and more intense regulation becomes detrimental?
3. Although many private companies and NGOs are taking it upon themselves to integrate checks for ethical standards into their accounting procedures, do you believe there will be a time when there will be 404 type requirements for these companies, and if so, when?
4. Are you aware of the findings of this study? Do you find them beneficial?
5. Do you think the current partner rotation requirements lead to fewer audit failures?
6. How common are frauds that involve employees “staying quiet” out of fear of losing their jobs?
7. On what percentage of your clients do you perform unpredictable fraud auditing techniques?
8. In your experience as an auditor, what is the biggest disagreement you have had with an audit committee?
9. Is there a different dynamic when you make a proposal to obtain versus retain an audit client?
10. How does management behavior play into the development of the audit program?
11. How will Sarbanes-Oxley affect the quality of earnings?
12. Do you agree that a person’s capability should be part of the fraud triangle?
13. Should auditors engage in strategic thinking to detect fraud?
14. In your experience what is the most effective method for finding fraud?

In terms of students’ critiques of the articles, one student noted that an article emphasized the importance of professional ethics but did not offer any insights to enhance or enforce ethical conduct. Similarly, students often comment on how articles in general raise issues but fail to offer solutions. Others note when the study has a small sample size or when the sample is drawn only from a particular industry like manufacturing. They also point out when findings only apply to a subset of firms. For example, auditing research often focuses solely on the largest audit firms. Other

students noted when findings applied to small public companies, but not to large ones. Students often point out how the general guidelines of an article may be difficult to apply to a specific audit. Similarly, they note that by taking a seven or twelve step approach as described in an article, other important steps may be left out, or the process has been oversimplified.

Often students note that practitioner articles are shorter and easier to read, but articles from academic journals review prior literature, gather and analyze data, and go into more depth. Perhaps as a result, students often point out in their critiques when articles lack statistical data to support their arguments. They also notice ways in which different types of articles complement each other. For example, one article may lay out some general issues while another article drills down into more specifics. This exercise provides students with a valuable opportunity to familiarize themselves with academic and practitioner journals before they begin their professional careers, an opportunity most of them may not have had otherwise. After completing this assignment, they come away with a much better understanding of the value of both types of publications and carry this knowledge of these valuable resources with them as they begin their careers. Many of my students indicated to me they were unaware that these publications existed, or did not know how to access them prior to the assignment, especially in the case of the academic journals.

The second research paper requires students to interview an external, internal, or governmental auditor regarding their specific professional duties and responsibilities. Students are allowed to choose their own practitioners as long as they are auditors of some kind. I discourage them from interviewing professors. Moreover, I verbally inform them to avoid relatives as interview subjects. Often students interview external auditors since they are the major focus of the financial auditing course. However, I have also had students contact internal and governmental auditors. Students typically ask between five and ten questions, and interviews last between 30 and 60 minutes. I require students to develop some of their own questions based on their research and I review them in advance of the interview. In some cases I will ask students to re-write a question if it is not clearly stated, or to develop additional questions if necessary. I also suggest some other questions they could use. I have given this assignment during both the fall and spring semesters. In my experience, practitioners are always excited about this project even during busy season. Students have rarely had difficulty finding someone to interview. I have found that state CPA societies are happy to help if a student cannot find someone on their own, but I encourage students to try to do so first.

Students prepare these second papers in question-and-answer format, and summarize what they have learned at the end of the paper. The interview gives students an opportunity to meet with an auditing professional and learn more about a topic they are interested in and already have learned something about after completing the first research paper. Auditing professionals have many insights to share with students beyond what they have read in the articles or learned in the classroom, and can give students career advice. Practitioners provide students with examples and stories that help them link new information to their existing knowledge (Bonk and Smith, 1998), and connect “what’s taught in the classroom and what the real world is like” (Evangelauf, 1989 p. A31). The process of interviewing an auditing professional also may lead to a mentoring relationship for students. Often students will interview an auditor at a firm they are considering working for. In some cases, students have accepted a job with a firm where they have already interviewed someone and begun to develop a relationship with that person.

My students have told me they found the interview assignment very beneficial to not only their educational experience, but also in terms of thinking about their future careers. In fact, several

of my students have sent me e-mails commenting on what a valuable learning experience they had as a result of the interview assignment. One student wrote, "This was a very valuable project for me...I learned a great deal from this and hope you continue this for future students."

In addition, practitioners have told me how impressed they were when my auditing students interviewed them. They noted how well prepared the students were and what excellent questions they asked. On several occasions, I noted that some of the questions my students asked during job interviews were based on their research projects. I have not had any negative feedback from practitioners regarding the interviews.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe these papers are an innovation because I am not aware of anyone that uses research paper assignments in this manner to educate students about practitioner and academic auditing literature, and to build on this knowledge by having them interact with an auditing professional. As I have stated above, I believe there are many educational benefits to these assignments including: educating students about rich sources of information that they can use in their careers; gaining more knowledge about an auditing topic of their choice; thinking critically about the strengths and weaknesses of the approach that is taken by each article; and learning directly from an auditing professional who has valuable insights both on the specific topic the students are interested in, as well as broad career guidance. Interacting with an auditing practitioner also provides students with a valuable opportunity to gain a mentor.

It would be very easy to adapt these assignments for other institutions or other courses. For example, students could examine a financial or managerial accounting topic, and then consult with a corporate accountant, controller, CFO or CMA; or do research on a finance topic, and then consult with a CFA. Similarly, research on a tax topic could require access to practitioner and academic tax publications, and then consultation with a tax professional. Future research could examine the effectiveness of these assignments in other courses.

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Appendix

Research Papers: Write a paper of 3 pages in length (typed and double-spaced) on an auditing topic of your choice. The paper should be based on an article from any of the following journals: Internal Auditing, The Internal Auditor, The Journal of Accountancy, or The CPA Journal. Compare this article to another article from one of the following journals: The Journal of Accounting, Auditing and Finance, Accounting, Organizations and Society, Advances in Accounting, Auditing: A Journal of Practice and Theory, Behavioral Research in Accounting, Managerial Auditing Journal or The Accounting Review. Your paper should state the objective of each article, how the author attempted to achieve this objective, whether the objective was achieved, and the importance of the article. You should also point out at least one strength and **weakness** of each article, and how the article relates to issues we have discussed in the course (i.e., chapter, pages). Develop 1-3 questions from each article that you would like to ask an auditor. **Do not summarize the paper!** Organization, grammar, and spelling are important as well as content. Pass in a photocopy of the article with your paper. Late assignments will be penalized.

Write a second 3 page paper based on an interview with an external, internal, or governmental auditor regarding their specific professional duties and responsibilities. Briefly describe their position and years of experience. **Do not interview professors!** Use question and answer format, and sum up what you learned at the end of the paper. The following is a partial list of questions that could be asked: Have you found evidence of financial misstatements or fraud, and if so, how was it uncovered? What advice would you have for someone entering the profession? What opportunities are available for accounting majors? What do you like/dislike about your job? How has technology changed the auditing process? What community service activities are you or your organization involved in? How important are writing skills for an accounting career? **It is important for you to develop some of your own questions based on paper #1.**