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IMPROVING THE PRACTICAL ACCOUNTING SKILLS OF STUDENTS BY USING APPROPRIATE TEACHING METHODS

Case
Study

Keywords

*Practical accounting skills;
Teaching methods;
Accounting education;
Accounting students;*

JEL Classification

M41

Abstract

This paper analyses how the student will be influenced by specific factors on the path of becoming a good practitioner. There is a need to keep sustaining and developing the profession of accounting in a world of continuous innovation. Therefore, this study is built upon the hypothesis that certain teaching methods used by teachers can help the student better acquire practical skills in accounting, as a technical discipline. The competences followed by academic programmes are in accordance with the IAESB International Education Standards and involve the acquirement of practical skills in accounting. This study focuses on the added value of some specific teaching methods to the practical skills gained by students as these methods are applied. The empiric research presents the preliminary findings of a study regarding the evaluation of the teaching methods used by the accounting teachers. The study concludes by linking certain teaching methods to the practical skills that will be developed by the students towards becoming professional accountants.

INTRODUCTION

In the opinion of Hassler (1950), “Sometimes we are inclined to treat the problems of improving teaching methods as belonging to schools of education, and our concern to be only of problems of accounting”, but there is a consistent need for well-prepared human resources, nowadays manifested in the labour market of current society, so this is how the interest for the field of accounting education occurred.

In a world that is in a continuous change, there is a need to keep building up the accounting profession and science. A student will be influenced by many factors while focusing to become a good practitioner.

The factors that influence the process of teaching and learning can be of two types: factors that concern the student as an individual, and factors that concern society.

In the first category of factors is the motivation of each student, the intellectual capacities, former education, age, life experience, and life-background.

The second category of factors considers the way in which society develops. This development has implications on the accounting profession and implicitly on the teaching methods used regarding the training of practitioners that can cope in the economic environment.

“Rapid technological developments have impacted delivery of education at all levels. Technology-enabled teaching methods are also now widespread. Technology can provide a virtual classroom facility for the students and teachers alike. Access to information has become as quick as a click. Never before has such a volume of information been so rapidly made available publicly. For education, such information saves time and efforts of students and teachers, and facilitates their learning. It ultimately becomes the responsibility of the teachers, tutors and lecturers to create a teaching environment that enables the students to attain quality understanding suiting their needs” (Shukla & Sharif, 2017).

Impacted by the development of technology, the methods of teaching accounting have their impact on the teaching process in this field.

Methodology

The present work will focus on the teaching methods used during the years of university education. The hypothesis of the present study is built upon that certain teaching methods used by teachers, can help the student better acquire practical skills in accounting, as a technical discipline.

In order to test the hypothesis, the following actions were made: studying the literature, the rules and the regulations, and the practical reality of the field. The research methods include general and specific approaches regarding the teaching methods which can be used in order to improve the practical accounting skills of students. Consequently, the author has used participative observation, information ordering and systematization, classification, comparative analysis and interpretation of the data regarding teaching methods in accounting in order to underline the most desirable methods which, when applied, can enhance the practical accounting skills of the student. Regarding the empirical research, the author will present brief preliminary results of a study that is still on-going. It addresses, among others, aspects related to the theme of this article.

The structure of this article is a concentric one, in the sense that the specialized literature and the theoretical aspects concerning the subject at matter encapsulate the core of the article – empirical research. The author will embark on this journey by debating the learning process in accounting. Later, the author will focus on the importance and nature of the practical skills in accounting (accounting practical skills), as well as on their regulation mode. The core of the article is represented by the empirical research in which the author presents the results of applying a questionnaire and interviews conducted within the university. The author continues by presenting some aspects from the specialized literature on the results of empirical research in order to present the conclusion that the author has reached.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Being a technical science, accounting teaching is based on competencies, which are defined by IAESB International Education Standards in specific areas. These competencies are materialized in learning outcomes or skills. HRSG which is a world leader in the field of competency-based talent management states that “in some ways, a skill and a competency are similar. On a basic level, they both identify an ability that an individual has acquired through training and experience. To succeed on the job, employees need to demonstrate the right mix of skills, knowledge, and on-the-job ability” (Beckett, 2018).

The author consulted the rules and regulations of the field and also the competencies followed by academic programmes of Economic Faculties in Romania. The author discovered that the competences followed by educational programmes in accounting are in accordance with the IAESB International Education Standards and involve the acquirement of practical skills in accounting. The

practical skills involve both generic skills and technical skills in accounting.

In the list below, the author summarises the main practical accounting skills found in the literature, in the International Education Standards and within the educational programmes of Romanian universities:

- Creativity
- Critical thinking
- Team work
- Applying accounting principles in economic transitions
- Applying methods and techniques of work in accounting
- Preparation of financial statements
- Interpretation of financial situations and related disclosures
- Analysis of data and information to support the decision-making process of management
- Evaluation of the performance of products and activity segments
- Use of accounting software

The acquirement of practical accounting skills is a process that takes time and is influenced by factors presented above. The author presents the flowing of this process through the Figure 1.

Following to acquire certain skills and competencies involve setting specific objectives and the teaching methods are the way of achieving the settled objectives. "Teaching method refers to the method or medium the teacher employs to achieve the goals of the teaching process which involves the delivery of information, skills and knowledge to students" (Rehab, 2018).

Burja, Burja, Voiculescu and Voiculescu (2006) define teaching methods as a sum of the following three aspects:

- "the way of carrying out the processes of training and education, teaching and learning,
- the set of principles, rules, norms, processes and means by which the optimal connection between the teaching activity of the teacher and the student learning activity is realised,
- the efficient management of the pedagogical act towards achieving the settled objectives."

The teaching methods which can be used to enhance the acquirement of practical skills in accounting have to present some key characteristics, such as:

- they are aimed at a practical objective, communicated to the students,
- optimally combine the conjunctive function with the formative function because they are based on the application of knowledge already held, onto which new ones are added,
- are adapted to the actual level of theoretical and practical knowledge of the student,
- facilitate the identification of empirical references of theoretical knowledge,

- the student actively being involved by direct interaction with the object/content of learning through interaction with elements from the real world (e.g. supporting documents and accounting processing, registers, specialized accounting software, etc.),
- based on the principle of intuition, thus stimulating learning through discovery that involves exploratory actions, of investigating reality,
- reproduce real situation meant to stimulate the professional reasoning of the student, causing him to express his opinion concerning the studied object,
- actions within them being coordinated by the teacher and either having a heuristic orientation (emphasizes the aspect of certain knowledge) or an algorithmic one (emphasizes the aspect of problematic knowledge).

Therefore, these aspects are the starting point of the author's empirical research regarding the teaching methods which can be used to enhance the acquirement of practical skills in accounting.

FINDINGS FROM EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The author is currently conducting a research concerning the adaptation of graduates in their practice at the moment they start their career. In this study, the author considers that the used methods in the teaching process have a significant role in terms of acquiring practical accounting skills appropriate to the reality, which will enable graduates to adapt to their practice. The questionnaire is thus part of a larger and on-going study, which is why the presented results are preliminary. Due to lack of time and contacts of graduates of other universities, the author has limited herself to popularizing the questionnaire only to the graduates of her university, from the last five promotions. The questionnaire was built on eight objectives, and within one of them, the graduates were asked to evaluate on a scale from one (very weak) to five (very strong), which teaching method had the strongest impact concerning the acquirement of practical skills. The author chose to include in the questionnaire a number of 12 teaching methods that the author considered most frequently used in accounting, following the study of specialized literature. The results of the questionnaire are presented in the Table 1.

The methods evaluated by the graduates as having a strong and very strong impact were: exemplification, exercise, case study, demonstration, using accounting software to exercise hypothetical accounting transactions. The author considers that the graduates, to one degree or another, have the experience of adapting to

practical realities. Thus, they can retrospectively and objectively evaluate the impact of teaching methods used by their teachers in acquiring practical skills.

In order to highlight the opinions of the students concerning the teaching methods that have the most results regarding the formation of practical accounting skills, the author included these aspects in a questionnaire addressed to the students, built on seven objectives. The author will focus on two of these in this present article. The questionnaire is part of the study mentioned earlier, that is why the presented results are preliminary, the questionnaire addressed to the graduates likewise. Due to lack of time, the author conducted the questionnaire only within author's university, to students in all three years of study.

One of the objectives considered in the questionnaire is to highlight the teaching methods that the students considered most appropriate in the process of acquiring practical skills. Following the study of specialised literature, in the questionnaire, the author took into consideration a number of 12 teaching methods that were subject to evaluation by the students. Specifically, the author asked the students to mark, from a scale of one (very weak) to five (very strong), which teaching method had the strongest impact in terms of acquiring practical skills. The methods evaluated as having a strong and very strong impact were: exemplification, demonstration, exercise, problem-based-learning, using accounting software for hypothetical practice. In the Table 2 the author presents the percentage obtained by each method evaluated as they resulted from the questionnaire.

Another objective of the questionnaire was to obtain some suggestions from the students concerning the possibilities of improving the way in which they form their practical skills. These were open answers, and 60% of respondents offered suggestions regarding the more frequent use of certain teaching methods. Of the methods referred to by the students in their suggestions, the author mentions: demonstration, case study using accounting software, problem-based learning, and debates.

As part of the same study, the author initiated an interview with the teachers of these students. The discussions focused on the teaching methods that can improve the acquisition of practical skills of students. In order for students to acquire practical skills, teachers from the accounting field, use methods such as: exercise, demonstration, practical training, conversation, experiment and simulation, case study, algorithmizing, problem-based learning, debate, and argumentation. Out of these, the most frequently used in acquiring accounting practical skills are: case study (used by all the interviewed teachers), followed by exercise, conversation, problem-based learning, debates (each used by

33,3% of the interviewed teachers). Of these, the following are considered the most efficient in acquiring practical skills: case study (70%), conversation and exercise (30% each) and problem-based learning (10%). There were also other teaching methods brought into the discussion, which were different from teacher to teacher, thus the author considered them to be negligible, compared to those present in most interviews.

In the interviews, the limits invoked by the teachers regarding the use of the most efficient teaching methods in relation to the acquisition of practical skills refer to:

- The motivation of students to get involved is low (over 60% of the respondents)
- The reluctance of students to the teaching methods that remove them from the comfort zone.
- Limited time spent with the students (due in part to the program of absenteeism)
- Absence of a legal framework that stimulates the business environment to support the training of students through consistent practice periods (often, they are formal)
- Lack of material resources.

Following the interviews, the author finds that in the context in which they are located, each teacher tries to use the teaching method that are adapted to the aims pursued, to the material thought, but also to the specifics of the students.

DISCUSSIONS: THE CONNECTION WITH THE LITERATURE OF THE FIELD

The results of the empirical research join the existing ones in the specialised literature and reinforce the beliefs of the researchers in the field regarding the most efficient and widespread teaching methods that are used to acquire the practical skills in accounting. In specialised literature, the majority of the studies consulted, it is recommended that the following teaching methods be effective for acquiring practical skills: case study, problem-based learning, and work-integrated learning, but the majority of the consulted studies approach the case study as an efficient method of developing accounting practical skills. There are studies concerning this particularised method in the accounting field since the 1950s. That is why the author will continue to reproduce, from the consulted literature, some aspects concerning the case study method. The aim is to emphasize the importance of the case study, regarding the development of practical skills in accounting.

One of the distinguishing features of the case method is its-emphasis upon the development of the personal powers of the student for analysis, judgment and the ability to make and carry out

decisions. The case method does offer advantages in fulfilling the objective of stimulating students to expand their powers of independence, insight and judgment. It forces students to pick their way through conflicting, non-typical, and often incomplete problems and still keep their feet. This method provides a constant emphasis upon the effective use of accounting data by people in all departments of an organization and drives home the fact that the operation of an accounting department is not an end in itself (Hassler, 1950).

The case-based learning is already a widely used method in business schools. The result of the study indicate that students benefited from the case-based learning approach in that they improved their knowledge and skills in accounting and felt that they had learnt something that could benefit them throughout their future lives out in the world and the workplace. The findings of this study confirm with previous studies that the case method is an effective way to develop and/or assess a variety of skills such as oral and written communication, analytical and problem solving, critical thinking and teamwork (Ahmad, 2017).

In relation to the practical competences presented initially, the author observes that the case study, as a teaching method, contributes to supporting the development of a significant number of practical accounting skills.

CONCLUSIONS

In the present article the author started off from the hypothesis that the teaching methods used by the teachers can improve the practical skills of the students. The author saw that the teaching methods are amongst the factors that influence the learning process of the student and are not to be neglected, not even in the field of accounting, which is a technical discipline.

The practical skills are seen as a result of the learning process and present an interest, as they have been standardized by the IAESB and the educational institutions from Romania have adopted them in this form. There are many studies related to the importance of the practical skills of the graduates for the business field. It is precisely because of their importance; it is vital that both the teachers and the students to unite their efforts in supporting their training in university.

An instrument by which the acquisition of skills can be supported is the one of the teaching methods used by the teachers. The preliminary results of the practical research that was carried on highlight the opinions of the graduates, students and teachers related to the topic of this article. They have

evaluated the teaching methods from the perspective of impact they have in supporting the process of acquiring accounting practical skills.

The consulted studies from the specialised literature are in agreement with the results of this research, even if they are preliminary. Thus, the teaching methods used the most frequent to form accounting skills that resulted from the research of specialised literature and the observation of reality are: case study, exemplification, exercise, demonstration, hypothetical practical training (using accounting software), and problem-based learning.

Acknowledgement

This work is supported by project POCU 125040, entitled "Development of the tertiary university education to support the economic growth - PROGRESSIO", co-financed by the European Social Fund under the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020.

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Table 1
The results of the evaluation made by the graduates

Methods	Assessment in percentage (%)				
	Very weak	Weak	Average	Strong	Very strong
Lecture (Oration)	0	20.0	45.5	25.5	9.1
Demonstration	0	5.5	20.0	43.0	30.9
Conversation	0	5.6	25.9	42.6	25.9
Exemplification	0	5.5	12.7	38.2	43.6
Groups of discussion	3.6	12.7	25.5	34.5	23.6
Exercise	0	3.7	14.8	33.3	48.1
Problem-based learning	0	5.5	30.9	23.6	40.0
Case study	0	5.5	14.5	38.2	41.8
Brainstorming	3.7	22.2	24.1	33.3	16.7
Team work	0	20	32.7	23.6	23.6
Simulation and role-play	9.1	16.4	25.5	20.0	29.1
Using an accounting software to exercise hypothetical accounting transactions	0	12.7	16.4	27.3	43.6

Source: processed by the author based on results of the questionnaire.

Table 2
The results of the evaluation made by the students

Methods	Assessment in percentage (%)				
	Very weak	Weak	Average	Strong	Very strong
Lecture (Oration)	13.7	19.2	34.2	23.3	9.6
Demonstration	1.4	4.1	21.0	28.4	44.6
Conversation	2.7	6.8	29.7	25.7	35.1
Exemplification	1.4	2.7	18.9	25.7	51.4
Groups of discussion	5.4	8.1	31.1	32.4	23.0
Exercise	1.4	5.4	21.6	23.0	48.6
Problem-based learning	4.1	12.2	17.6	36.5	29.7
Case study	6.8	9.6	28.8	21.9	32.9
Brainstorming	13.7	21.9	27.4	23.3	13.7
Team work	4.1	12.2	28.4	31.1	24.3
Simulation and role-play	9.5	17.6	35.1	17.6	20.3
Using an accounting software to exercise hypothetical accounting transactions	2.7	6.8	28.8	30.1	31.5

Source: processed by the author based on results of the questionnaire.

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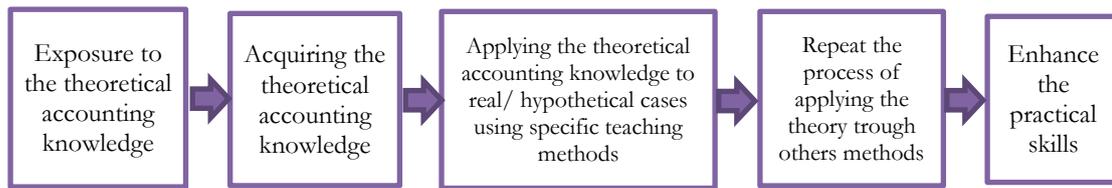


Figure 1
The process of acquiring skills in accounting
Source: own projection based on literature & reality