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Pre-service teachers' engagement through small group tutorial learning strategy in accounting

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Abstract

Teaching in the 21st century involves encouraging creativity and active engagement of students in the learning process. This requires using student-centred approaches for tertiary students to improve their learning experiences and help develop 21st-century skills. Hence, small group learning has become a significant priority in preparing and equipping accounting students with the creative, collaborative, problem-solving skills and academic competencies required in the workplace. This article employed a qualitative case study research approach within the interpretive paradigm to understand how pre-service Accounting teachers learn through a small group tutorial strategy. Twenty pre-service Accounting teachers were purposively selected from a population of first-year pre-service Accounting teachers. Data were obtained through semi-structured individual telephonic and WhatsApp-based focus group interviews and analysed using the thematic analysis method. What emerged from the findings is that participants acknowledged the role of small group tutorials in creating a supportive social environment that allowed opportunities for enhancing learning of procedural processes and problem-solving skills. Most pre-service teachers were inspired to express themselves and share more freely without being ridiculed. Engagement in small group tutorials led to positive interdependence and interaction while developing self-confidence and interpersonal skills. Diversity in members created spaces for students to share different viewpoints on analytical approaches to solving Accounting problems.

Keywords: Accounting pre-service teachers, engagement, small group tutorials, group work, learning strategy.

Introduction

Teaching in the 21st century is not merely based on delivering content and assessing the students' understanding; it involves encouraging the active participation of students in the learning process to enhance their understanding of theoretical knowledge and rigorous application of fundamental principles (Crawford & Jenkins, 2018; Ruminar, 2018). The teaching and learning process requires the total engagement of students in the learning process. This necessitates using student-centred approaches to teaching and learning to enable students to employ various learning strategies.

The majority of scholars confirm that in many Accounting classes, lecturers generally rely on rigid procedures and methods of teaching and assessment without considering the necessity to actively engage students in enhancing the development of vital skills (Frick et al., 2020; Lubbe, 2016; Phan, 2018). Hence, there is a need to use appropriate teaching and learning techniques that allow students to participate in learning through interaction with teachers and peers. Accounting is a practical subject that entails a specific kind of practice. One of the core elements of the practical learning of Accounting is engaging the students in written work and independent practice through class activities, tutorials, interactive notes and quizzes. These activities are crucial in enhancing students' understanding of new knowledge. Pereira and Sithole (2020) articulate that for learning to be engaging, students should be given room to discover information by themselves to become real-world explorers. According to Sholikah and Harsono (2021), hands-on learning is one of the best practices for promoting learner-centredness.

Therefore, the practical activities allow students to practise skills, apply processes and procedures, and analyse and interpret financial information within a given context. Group activities have become fundamental to enhancing students' learning experiences and equipping Accounting students with the creative, collaborative, problem-solving skills and academic competencies required in the world of work (Dunn & Kennedy, 2019; Frick et al., 2020; Pereira & Sithole, 2020; Rudin, 2019).

The context mentioned above incited Accounting lecturers at the university where the study was conducted to introduce hybrid teaching and learning strategies to first-year pre-service teachers to strengthen the learning and understanding of unique concepts in Accounting. Group tutorials were one of the strategies introduced to offer pre-service teachers an opportunity to engage with learning material to enhance active learning collaboratively. Pre-service teachers were expected to work within their groups during the semester to complete their tutorials outside the lecture sessions. They had to display the combined work done outside the classroom by doing corrections and providing solutions in class. These group tutorials were intended to improve pre-service teachers' learning experience and outcomes and supplement in-class learning.

Although studies have been conducted on students' learning through tutorials, the literature shows that very few studies have been undertaken in Accounting Education in South Africa. Thus, this paper aims to reduce the dearth of research in Accounting by contributing to knowledge, particularly on learning through group tutorials. The study aims to explore how pre-service teachers learn in small group tutorial learning strategy in Accounting. The study aims to answer the following research question: How do pre-service Accounting teachers learn through a small group tutorial strategy in one Higher Education institution in South Africa?

The following sections of the article present a literature review of pertinent concepts, followed by a theory that frames the study. The research methodology, findings, discussion, and concluding remarks are also presented.

Literature review

This section reviews the literature on the existing body of knowledge that investigates the notions of student engagement in group work and small group tutorials. It also presents the theory that underpins this study.

Student engagement in group work

Scholars describe students' engagement as participation, commitment, contribution and involvement in learning (Baloche & Brody, 2017; Crawford & Jenkins, 2018; Frykedal & Chiriac, 2018; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Zapata, 2020). According to Phan (2018), students' engagement entails how students take part in discussions and share in learning to construct knowledge. Crawford and Jenkins (2018) argue that improvement in understanding new knowledge is influenced by the students' extent of engagement in the learning process.

According to Frykedal and Chiriac (2018), group work is an instructional strategy that encourages active engagement with content and socialisation among students, where students help each other in dyads while learning simultaneously. Engaging students in group work allows them to work collaboratively on set tasks and take responsibility for the learning process (Dunn & Kennedy, 2019; Frykedal & Chiriac, 2018). This engagement encourages contribution, articulation of ideas, interdependence, interaction, joint inquiry, understanding, and application of new knowledge (Baloche & Brody, 2017; Phan, 2018). Rathnum and Moodley (2022) assert that when students learn in a collaborative environment, they collect extensive information to engender new thoughts for effective learning. Most scholars believe that group work encourages inclusivity by combining students of diverse abilities and backgrounds. This gives them a platform to explore varied viewpoints (Baloche & Brody, 2017; Crawford & Jenkins, 2018; Frykedal & Chiriac, 2018).

Students with difficulty talking in class may feel free to speak in a small group (Crawford & Jenkins, 2018). When students are at liberty to

do their work collaboratively, they foster habits of communal learning rather than acting as passive listeners. This inspires them to respect one another's opinions and experiences (Gillies, 2016).

Students' experiences of learning in small group tutorials

Tutorials are considered an essential instructional strategy for students because they enhance learning new content (Crawford & Jenkins, 2018; Rathnum & Moodley, 2022). Tutorial activities are efficient and effective in improving understanding, particularly in subjects that need much practice, like Accounting. Literature shows that students learn faster and better in mastering new knowledge and skills when they are actively involved in discussions by interacting with their lecturers and peers and doing their practical activities in small groups (Abbott & Palatnik, 2018; Baloche & Brody, 2017; Frykedal & Chiriac, 2018; Mahoney, 2019; Pereira & Sithole, 2020).

Most scholars in the field of commerce believe that engaging students in tutorial groups enhances their learning experience and fosters a deeper comprehension (Colver & Fry, 2016; De Jager & Bitzer, 2016; Dix, 2018; Ontong et al., 2020; Seow & Pan, 2017). Colver and Fry (2016) surveyed undergraduate Business Education students' perceptions of the usefulness of group tutorials. Their findings indicate that the participating students prefer the smaller and more intimate class size of the tutorials. Students value the type of interaction in the more miniature group tutorials because they are more hands-on. A study by De Jager and Bitzer (2016) found that students who participated in group tutorials for financial accounting viewed this learning strategy as beneficial since it improved their pass rates. In their study, Ontong et al. (2020) identified group tutorials as an interactive method of promoting engagement and problem-solving skills required by Accounting students. Doing tutorials in small groups is more beneficial to students since each question is elucidated in-depth while providing diverse solutions (Mahoney, 2019; Rathnum & Moodley, 2022; Youde, 2020).

In South Africa, Dix (2018) studied the factors influencing the Financial Accounting 1 students' engagement with the subject material and then identified ways to improve engagement. Dix asserted that since there are many students in Financial Accounting 1 whose home language is isiZulu, group tutorials allow students to engage in an environment that feels less threatening to them and more conducive to asking questions without the fear of a language barrier. This is confirmed by Rathnum and Moodley (2022) and Pereira and Sithole (2020), who found that students felt more comfortable learning challenging and complicated concepts with their peers during group tutorials.

Zendler and Greiner (2020) conducted a study to assess students' tutorial experiences at a New Zealand university. Results showed that during group tutorials, the practical feedback provided by their peers enhanced student learning and contributed to better understanding and greater levels of student satisfaction with their learning experiences in electronic and computer subjects. In their study on Maths, van Veggel and Amory (2014) found that small group tutorials enhance students' confidence and improve their academic performance.

Implementing online tutorials is becoming more prevalent as institutions adopt a blended learning approach. Scholars like Ontong et al. (2020), Seow & Pan (2017), and ZHANG et al. (2020) agree that online tutorials facilitate the learning of materials at students' own pace and schedule, as they can access them whenever it is convenient for them. Seow and Pan (2017) implemented an online tutorial to teach data modelling in an Accounting Information Systems course. They identified a significant increase in students' perceived knowledge compared to their knowledge before using the online tutorial. Ontong et al. (2020) found that Financial Accounting students valued the round-the-clock accessibility of online tutorials since it allows them to learn outside the classroom at their own pace.

Theoretical framework

This study is framed by constructivism theory, premised on the belief that knowledge is actively constructed by the learners, who construct

knowledge during teaching and learning. (Bada & Olusegun, 2015; Kalpana, 2014; Yadav, 2016). Constructivism promotes interaction, where teachers and learners collaborate to create new ideas by applying previous knowledge and experience to new or different situations. According to Paz-Enrique and Leyva-Hernández (2022), knowledge and learning experiences are not merely transmitted; individuals are responsible for constructing their learning. Constructivism is grounded on the belief that learners are active agents in their learning process because they can construct a deep understanding of knowledge used to solve problems (Pande & Bahrathi, 2020; Turner & Baskerville, 2013).

Muhajirah (2020) argues that in a constructivist learning environment, knowledge is socially constructed by allowing students to construct their knowledge individually and collectively. This happens when they are engaged in cooperative learning groups and sharing the construction of their ideas with fellow students. In constructivist learning, teachers and learners are perceived to have interpersonal relationships since learning results from social interaction and cannot occur in isolation (Eybers, 2018; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2020). Constructivists assume that the learning process is based on previous constructs. Hence, meaningful learning occurs when students reflect on new knowledge and link it to their pre-existing frameworks of knowledge (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). This theory is suitable in framing the study because, in Accounting, learning occurs when students are presented with financial problems that they have to solve collectively by applying the theoretical knowledge and analytical skills gained through interacting with their teachers and peers.

Methodology

In this inquiry, we followed a qualitative case study research approach within the interpretive paradigm to understand how pre-service Accounting teachers learn through a small group tutorial strategy. A qualitative case study approach afforded spaces to interact with the pre-service teachers directly to understand their real-world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Sampling

The study sample comprises twenty purposively selected first-year pre-service Accounting teachers registered for a four-year Bachelor of Education programme from one South African higher-education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. These participants were doing Accounting Level 1 (EDAC113), the first module in the Accounting Education specialisation. The use of purposive sampling allowed sampling of pre-service Accounting teachers who could easily be accessible for inclusion in the data-generation process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Data generation methods

To solicit qualitative data, the study employed one-on-one telephonic semi-structured interviews and WhatsApp-based focus group interviews (FGIs). The twenty pre-service Accounting teachers were individually interviewed by telephone, after which they were put into four groups of five for the WhatsApp-based FGIs. The duration for each one-on-one telephonic interview was 40 to 45 minutes. WhatsApp-based focus group interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. A voice recorder was used to capture all interviews.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis since it is an appropriate method for the researcher to understand experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across data sets (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The audio data from the individual and focus group interviews was transcribed into textual data. The transcribed data were given to the participants to verify that it was undoubtedly what was said, serving as member checking and adding to credibility and trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A process of open coding was employed to establish categories. Identified categories were revised and gathered into specified themes. The findings are presented according to different themes that emerged during data analysis.

Ethical issues

The permission to conduct the research was secured from the university where the authors are based to adhere to the ethical code of conduct. Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were explained to the participants and observed during the study period. To safeguard confidentiality and anonymity, participants were allocated pseudonyms.

Results

The findings of this study were consolidated into the following themes: Shared construction of knowledge and skills, communal exposure to challenging problems, fostering a continuous supportive environment, and a variety of perspectives. Verbal quotes are used to support the data presented.

Co-construction of knowledge and skills

Pre-service Accounting teachers had the opportunity to engage in written tutorials in groups to ascertain their understanding of previous and new concepts essential to solving financial problems. They appreciate the critical role that group tutorials played in reinforcing the understanding of new knowledge and applying what had been learnt into practice. Participants felt that take-home practice activities in the form of tutorials were essential in intensifying their understanding of new knowledge. Tutorials were regarded as a critical form of learning and assessment strategy to review and reinforce understanding of new knowledge independently after lectures in their own time. Participants added that engaging in group tutorials that were smaller than usual classes was beneficial as it gave them ample time to pay more attention to critical abstract concepts that involved detailed explanations and areas where they needed more clarity.

They felt that this was very enlightening since they had time to ask questions and share ideas on how to formulate responses, which were then explained by their peers. The participants stated that group members could clarify step-by-step how certain Accounting statements were prepared. The following excerpt describes how Khetha viewed small group tutorials in this regard.

"*We use groups to do tutorials and revise together. It is very effective; on campus, we would meet and discuss tutorials in groups every afternoon. Small groups allow everyone to participate, and we also ask questions if you do not understand."* (Member of Focus Group 2)

Findings from the study showed that students' engagement in group tutorials motivated information exchange, which ensured increased participation and enhanced learning and understanding of new concepts. Reviewing what they had been learning together helped them gain a new perspective on Accounting concepts.

Communal exposure to challenging problems

The participants often found it challenging to analyse and solve unfamiliar financial problems alone. They indicated that they were given real-life problem scenarios that required authentic solutions. Hence, they often struggle to apply their financial knowledge to formulating solutions to financial problems. However, they valued the opportunities they received in collaboratively discussing scenarios and case studies.

"In Accounting, difficult topics like Property, Plant and Equipment require group effort. Although we did that in grades 11 and 12, it is difficult to tackle these tutorials alone. It was easy to learn these topics because we used to meet in small groups to share our knowledge before going to class." (Dlamini)

Repeated exposure was essential for them to improve the analytical and thinking skills required to solve financial problems. As a result, they were given more practice activities to help develop the skills required to understand the practical implications and value of the scenarios in Accounting. This is what Sazi said:

"*Lecturers gave us more activities on problem-solving questions. These questions are not easy. However, because we did them together, other students helped us to analyse the problems. We discuss them together to understand the problems and get more answers from other students*."

This view is also confirmed by Lunga, who explained that they usually find it challenging to apply their financial knowledge in analysing financial problems and drawing conclusions based on the analysis of the scenarios. However, they believed the only way to develop these essential skills was through continuous exposure to group application exercises.

"We always fail to analyse problems because identifying the problem in the scenarios is not easy. Our lecturer gave us more tutorials on these problems because all topics had problem-solving questions. They require us to do difficult calculations. It would be much better if we did tutorials in groups. I only mastered the techniques in tutorials as the environment is not intimidating." (Lunga)

Pre-service teachers usually need help applying their financial knowledge to analyse financial problems and draw conclusions based on the analysis of the scenarios. Constant exposure was crucial for their enhancement of the analytical and reasoning abilities needed to solve financial problems. Consequently, they received additional practice tasks aimed at cultivating the essential skills needed to grasp the practical implications and importance of the scenarios in Accounting.

Variety of perspectives and solutions

The participants acknowledge that during tutorial discussions, group members came with diverse knowledge and experiences, which enriched the learning experience for all members of the groups. Small group tutorial discussions created an environment for learning that supported all students. The various detailed explanations from other students elucidated how specific Accounting processes and procedures occurred. This diversity allowed for different learning approaches as members used varied methods to solve financial problems. This is what Phume said:

"Well, I have gained a lot from small tutorial groups as they allow us to ask questions and seek clarifications. This has helped me because you get many explanations from other members. I had challenges in downloading and uploading Accounting learning materials, but thanks to tutorials, I grasped the concepts". (Member of Focus Group 1)

Pre-service teachers believed that the various members offered spaces for them to develop different analytical approaches to the problems. The benefit of deliberating on the given tutorials with peers was that they acquired new and different perspectives on analysing financial problems. Understanding such complex questions required the participants to make sense of tutorial questions together and formulate and share diverse solutions. Doing tutorials in a group enabled students to approach financial problems and challenging calculations from the perspectives of others. Although these scenarios were challenging, the various students came up with different solutions based on their experiences and justifications to defend their solutions. This is what Thandi said:

"*What I have noticed is that we have different approaches to solving problems in Accounting. Those people who are good at numbers come with good methods to do calculations, and others are quick in solving Accounting problems if we are given scenarios. We have many methods of doing calculations. Some of them I did not even think of."* (Thandi)

Some students formulated different methods of analysing the questions. This was very helpful to them because it was easy to interpret the scenarios, and there were different opinions and reasons for answers from other students. They valued the contributions and

viewpoints of peers since this allowed them to approach the given task differently.

Fostering a constant supportive environment

The data showed that most participants preferred to do tutorials in small groups outside the lectures because some felt scared to ask questions in class. When doing work in groups outside the class, they felt more confident about sharing their thoughts or asking questions. Doing work collaboratively created opportunities for participants to build self-confidence because they felt comfortable participating in discussions and contributing ideas without fear of being ridiculed by other students. Vuyo confirmed this:

"*Group work helped me so much because I was shy and scared to answer or ask questions in class. I was worried about people judging my answers. However, working as a group gave me a small amount of confidence even to ask my peers to explain if there is something that I do not understand*." (Vuyo)

The small group tutorials allowed social interaction among group members while learning together. These groups made learning easier through personal support from peers. Participants also revealed that the small group discussions were very effective as they could interact more with peers in small groups. They were content to do their work in groups because they supported each other in a friendly manner. Based on the participants' responses, studying with classmates worked well for them because it encouraged everyone to participate and understand better. Participants also explained that small group discussions allowed them to share ideas and learning materials, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

"*Even if you asked more questions, they responded to your questions. Doing tutorials in small groups encouraged each other, especially because we could add to the answers. My group members would clarify every concept to ensure everyone benefited from the discussion, making you think of other methods to approach the scenarios.*" (Elvis)

Participants acknowledged the advantages of engaging in tutorials with peers, allowing them to share their knowledge through discussions and explanations before attending their classes.

Discussion

Doing tutorials in small groups enabled pre-service teachers to learn collaboratively. Direct interaction with their peers during problem-solving tutorials further encouraged the formation of collaborative learning environments that enhanced the formulation of diverse solutions to problems (Frick et al., 2020; Gillies, 2016). What was revealed from the findings is that the participants regarded group tutorials as a critical learning strategy that was essential in developing efficiency and accuracy in challenging procedures and financial problems. This finding is supported by Jolliffe and Snaith (2017), who stated that discussion groups are a space where all members of a community share thoughts in authentic contexts. The idea of students seeking solutions collaboratively is also confirmed in a study by Kufre and Abe (2017), who indicated that more group tutorials created opportunities for them to explore different methods of solving financial calculations, and this reinforced learning and ensured understanding.

Findings also demonstrated that participants valued the social relationships with their peers. Students who appeared to comprehend challenging problems well were determined to uplift those struggling with tutorials to be at the same level as them. This finding is supported by most researchers who asserted that improved shared learning that nurtures a sense of belonging may emanate from social interaction and constant discussion with peers (Blessinger, 2017; Gillies, 2016; Frykedal & Chiriac, 2018; Phan, 2018).

The pre-service teachers acknowledge the effect of small group tutorials in creating a nurturing social atmosphere that permits all to engage in learning with respect for each other more casually, which may have made it easier for more introverted members to participate (Johnson

& Johnson, 2017). Jolliffe and Snaith (2017) confirmed that group interaction allowed less assertive students to engage in discussions and share their opinions and experiences in a safe platform. Some scholars confirmed that small group discussions create opportunities to build self-confidence because students are not scared of being ridiculed by other students (Gillies, 2016; Erasmus & Fourie, 2018; Frick et al., 2020; Jolliffe & Snaith, 2017).

Most scholars concur that engaging in challenging tasks in groups can lead to various answers to problems (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2017; Jolliffe & Snaith, 2017; Phan, 2018). They agree that when many students apply their minds to the problem, they come with different contributions. In this study, Pre-service teachers felt that the variety of the members in groups gave them a space to post and share varied solutions on how to analyse financial problems, resulting in diverse solutions to the problems. Doing tutorials in small groups is more beneficial to students because every question is thoroughly explained, and various answers are offered (Colver & Fry, 2016; De Jager & Bitzer, 2016; Dix, 2018; Rathnum & Moodley, 2022; Youde, 2020). Ontong et al. (2020) and Seow and Pan (2017) add that as students look at the questions from different viewpoints, they apply deeper analysis, which helps develop critical thinking skills and leads to a deeper understanding. In agreement with constructivism, when Accounting students are allowed to discover strategies to solve problems and learn to discuss ideas of their own accord, meaningful and cognitive stimulation is acquired (Aljohani, 2017).

Recommendations

This article offers valuable insights to teacher educators and other academics on how small group learning can be used in the pedagogical process to develop students' engagement and learning while developing the collaborative and social skills expected of graduate teachers. Being a case study, the generalisation of the study's outcomes may be limited, although stakeholders in similar socioeconomic backgrounds would find it helpful. Since the study focused on a level one Accounting cohort of students, interested researchers could pursue studies by extending the scope to include all three levels of Accounting cohorts. Furthermore, future studies may use a quantitative or mixed approach in exploring the experiences of accounting pre-service teachers with learning through a small group tutorial strategy.

Conclusion

This article presented pre-service teachers' experiences engaged in active learning through tutorial groups in Accounting. In a context urged by the necessity for students to be engaged in communal learning, participants acknowledged the role of group tutorials in supporting their learning by nurturing a supportive social space that creates opportunities for active learning. This study revealed that, besides enhancing comprehension of new knowledge, group tutorials also equip students with engendered communication and social and interactive skills, which are highly required in the workplace. As students spontaneously express their views and correct their misconceptions within the confines of the safety of their small groups, they develop skills to listen to other students and articulate and communicate their viewpoints.

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