

Self-Knowledge and Reflection in the MBA Accounting Classroom

The Goal

Increase reflection, self-knowledge, and accountability in the professor and MBA students.

Environment of the intervention

Accounting 550 is the sole accounting course in the emerging leaders MBA program. The course focuses on analyzing and understanding cost information for use in short and long term decision-making. The students in the course are all future MBAs, typically with between 0 to 3 years of work experience.

Background

All of us as humans suffer what is called the optimism bias. We believe, on average, that we are better than the majority of others at things important to us (e.g. academics) - an obvious mathematical impossibility. We believe, on average, that we are doing better than we are. In regards to us as students, we typically think we have done more work and are more prepared than we may be. In regards to us as teachers or professors, we likely believe that we have performed better, and done more for our students, than may be the case. This may lead us as students to study less than needed, or as professors to prepare less or work less for our students than we should. Self-knowledge gained through reflection and honest assessment may be a way to combat these harmful outcomes.

Jesuit –Informed Intervention

The hope is to promote self-knowledge, or awareness, in the tradition of the Jesuit understanding of the Christian identity in both the students and the professor. Through promoting self-awareness, we can lessen harmful biases, such as the optimism bias, which are likely to creep into an academic setting. Self-awareness in the Christian identity consists of three things according to Traub: (1) that one is a creature, not creator – which leads to gratitude, (2) that one is a sinner, not perfect – where awareness of failure leads to humility (3) that one is made in the image and likeness of God - where acknowledging that one is like God leads to the capability to love much. In addition, Traub points out, very rightly, that “for the academic, whose calling involves being an “expert” in one’s field, humility can be a particularly challenging virtue”.

In addition to the traditional academic concerns regarding the optimism bias; there are further considerations regarding the current national culture, which seems to be more concerned with image and pride, which may ultimately magnify the optimism bias. This potential cultural magnification makes promotion of self-awareness in the classroom all the more important today.

Method

Students

Regular feedback in the classroom in terms of graded academic work certainly helps to promote self-awareness in students. However, the goal of this intervention is to go beyond the typical. What was done here was to have students fill out online surveys throughout the semester – via polleverywhere.com and, more importantly here, to complete two minute papers throughout the first half of the semester. The goal of minute papers is to allow for anonymous private feedback to the professor. Minute papers have been theorized to improve both engagement and motivation ultimately improving performance. The relevant question for student self-awareness on the initial minute paper was:

“The recommended amount of time to obtain an average grade for an average student is 3 hours outside of class for every one hour in class. Given this, how much time do you plan on spending outside of class?
_____ hours

Later, I’m going to ask you if you have done this. However, I will not ask for identifiable information. Rather, the point is to hold you accountable to yourself.“

On the second minute paper, students were then asked to provide a statement, again anonymous and not linked to their earlier response, if they had fulfilled their earlier stated obligation. While many students did claim they had fulfilled their obligation, many also admitted that they had not. The purpose of this intervention was to have two touchpoints to bring students back to the expected level of effort in the course and to encourage them to hold themselves accountable for their initial commitment.

Professor

As Traub points out in his book – “a particular liability of the professoriate in the area of self-knowledge stems from a lack of checks and balances. You can close yourself up or expose yourself to criticism.” To promote self-knowledge, increase accountability, and to expose myself to more criticism; I took three main steps. First, I requested other professors come in and observe my teaching. Second, I had questions on the minute papers designed to provide anonymous, private feedback. Finally, I used software in the classroom to provide anonymous, public feedback about the course.

Criticism is uncomfortable, perhaps even painful. However, I believe that it does promote growth. Throughout the second half of the semester, I had two other professors observe my teaching and provide feedback. One was an accounting professor as well and the other was an education professor. Both were valuable experiences and I would encourage all of my colleagues to get feedback from an expert in method (education) and another expert in subject matter (someone in their department). I sincerely hope I am able to periodically continue this practice. While it is not particularly pleasant to be criticized, I strongly believe that regular critiques improve performance.

In seeking feedback from students throughout the semester, I believe anonymity to be paramount. I think they are more likely to provide honest feedback when they know that any negative comments cannot be traced back to them. While I believe that anonymity will improve the quality of the feedback, I also believe that sometimes it is best provided in a private environment (i.e. minute papers) while in others it is best provided in a public environment (i.e. polleverywhere.com).

The questions I asked via minute papers typically had longer answers, were more opinion based, and were less likely to affect the structure of the current course. The goal of these questions was to provide information on how students view higher education, what they hoped to get out of the course and provide a forum to state any concerns they had without the possibility of negative consequences. An excerpt of the initial minute paper follows:

Please help me learn a little about your goals and outlooks regarding education and this class in particular. I realize your answers to these may change. Some of these I will ask you again in a few weeks. My hope is this will assist me in structuring the class. I will be happy to share my opinions, as of today, with you. Like you, my answers will likely change throughout the semester on some of these.

What is the purpose of college, graduate or undergraduate, as percentages adding to 100%:
Certification (getting a slip of paper saying you know something) _____
Education (learning for the purpose of learning / becoming a "better" person) _____
Job training (learning things to get a job) _____
Other (please explain) _____

Does your answer differ depending on the level of education or the field of study?

What do you hope to learn in this class? In other words, why are you here? These questions may have the same or different answers.

The answers to the questions above were not likely to affect other students in the class. However, some questions that I gathered data on were designed to affect class format. Therefore, one student's answers would affect what another student may experience in the classroom. These questions were asked via polleverywhere.com where the students answered questions via their cellphones or laptops in class. All responses were anonymous and as answers were submitted online, the poll results were updated real-time and the responses projected at the front of the classroom. The hope is that this would promote trust and transparency between the students and professor. The students were able to see the responses being updated real time, and know the ultimate outcome of the class feedback. The students could therefore know that their feedback was being integrated into decisions regarding the structure of the course.

Questions asked in this manner were things such as desired test format (e.g. majority multiple choice or majority open form problem) and desired class format (e.g. more / less lecture; more instructor led problems or group led problems). While I held the rigor and content of the course constant, I was able to cater more to the desires of the class regarding format. If the class voted for more problems, I certainly would not eliminate lectures on concepts, but I could reallocate class time, rely on students reading more, and spend more time on quantitative problems in class. Alternately, if they requested more lecture, I could rely more on homework sets and spend more time discussing application and concepts in class. I believe that the real time, public feedback promoted trust and showed students that I valued how they learned and that I desired to spend our very limited class time in the most effective way possible.

Reflections on the Semester

As is commonly discussed, each semester is different. We are different as professors, there is a different student body, and the climate in the classroom is different for both these reasons and innumerable others. In addition, the design of the intervention discussed above, and the included anonymity makes any

correlational analysis impossible. However, all of that said, I believe that the intervention was helpful. Students seemed to be more engaged than typical and the semester resulted in one of the highest GPAs that I have had in an MBA class over my 10 years of teaching. Skepticism regarding the ultimate efficacy of this intervention to affect grades should, indeed, be high. It is quite possible that this was just an abnormally good group of students and therefore that engagement and GPAs would have been the same with or without the intervention. However, my belief is that the intervention did have an impact and I do plan to continue a focus on self-knowledge inside the classroom, both for myself and for the students.