

PRE-SERVICE ACCOUNTING EDUCATION TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF ACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH GROUP WORK AT A UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores pre-service teachers' experiences of active learning through group work in Accounting Education. The study employed a qualitative case study. Data were obtained through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews from forty purposively selected pre-service Accounting teachers. Reflective journals were used to supplement the interviews. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse pre-service teachers' experiences. What emerged from the findings is that participants acknowledged the role of group work in assisting their learning by creating a supportive social environment that allows opportunities for active learning. The majority of the pre-service teachers, including those who are usually shy and less assertive, were inspired to express themselves in a more relaxed manner without being ridiculed. Engagement in small group work led to positive interdependence and interaction while developing interpersonal and social skills. Diversity in members created spaces for students to create diverse analytical approaches to resolving Accounting problems.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, Accounting Education, active learning, group work, teachers' experiences

INTRODUCTION

Teaching strategies have been known to have a significant influence on students' academic achievement since they play a vital role in effective teaching and learning of new content. Teachers, therefore, should apply appropriate teaching methods to facilitate the process of knowledge transmission. However, the literature consistently shows that teachers' application of ineffective teaching methods is viewed as one of the contributory factors to continuing poor academic performance by most students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Ayeni 2011; Davidson and Major 2014).

It is also evident from research that failure to use teaching methods catering for different students' learning styles contributes to undesirable performance because every learner uniquely interprets new knowledge (Ayeni 2011; Okoro 2015; Myers 2016; Pereira and Sithole 2020). As such, teaching methods are known to impact the quality of teaching, which is often reflected by students' performance (Ayeni 2011; Edwards and Nuttall 2016). For teaching to be effective, Ayeni (2011) maintains that teachers need to be acquainted with various strategies that recognise the complexity of the concepts to be covered as well as students' learning styles.

Since students have different abilities and learning styles (Ayeni 2011; Crawford and Jenkins 2018; Gillies 2016), this sole use of a lecture-based method makes it very difficult to cater for individual differences. These authors have confirmed that such methods do not accommodate students' level of understanding, as not all students are good at grasping information through listening and note-taking. This necessitates the use of teaching and learning methods that involve students as active participants in the learning process while interacting with others and working jointly.

Although student-centred teaching approaches are central in developing necessary skills that students require for employment, the sole use of the lecture method still prevails in Accounting education in many universities (Erasmus and Fourie 2018; Myers 2016; Okoro 2015; Thomson and Washington 2015). Accounting educators in most universities still rely heavily on direct instruction where they control the instructional process by delivering the content to the entire class, with less student involvement (Davidson and Major 2014; Edwards and Nuttall 2016; Kwarteng 2014; Myers 2016).

Meanwhile, drastic changes in the subject Accounting demand that teachers equip learners with the higher-order thinking skills they need to be able to comprehend and analyse financial information. The implication is that Accounting teachers are, therefore, required to use teaching strategies that will assist learners in developing analytical, problem-solving and communication skills that are pertinent to analyse and interpret financial information (Thomson and Washington 2015). This calls for more open-ended scenarios and problem-solving teaching approaches to allow students to be engaged in debates while being challenged to think creatively (Kwarteng 2014; Ngwenya, 2016). These changes in teaching approaches created a need for Accounting pre-service teachers to acquire and enhance interpersonal skills, including the ability to interact with others, with the capacity to think critically and creatively and learn how to integrate these skills into their classroom practice.

The background cited above prompted Accounting lecturers at the university where the study was conducted to consider changing teaching strategies. Group work was used to provide an opportunity for students to engage with learning material while interacting with and learning

from one another to enhance active learning. In implementing the group activities, theoretical insights were drawn from the Social Interdependent Theory (SIT) (Johnson and Johnson 2002). The study thus seeks to answer the following research question: What are pre-service teachers' experiences of active learning through group work in Accounting Education in one university in South Africa? To answer this question, the experiences of fourth-year Accounting students involved in group work in a teaching method module were examined using semi-structured interviews. The remainder of the article proceeds with a literature review of relevant concepts, followed by an exposition of the research theory and a contextual explanation. After that, the research methodology, findings, and discussion are presented before the concluding remarks.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Active Learning

Active Learning (AL) is a form of learning in which students are vigorously involved in the learning process. Rather than passively acquiring knowledge, students are engaged with materials as active participants in the learning process (Gillies 2016; Little 2015; Nouri 2016; Phan 2018). AL strategies are predominantly student-centred, allowing students to construct knowledge from their learning experiences by building on an existing knowledge base (Kong 2014; Mathias 2014; Schul 2011). It is a shift from the traditional approach to education that is content-laden and driven by the educator, who aims to impart knowledge to the student through a learning experience that is principally driven by the latter (Mathias 2014; Nouri 2016). It entails relinquishing some control and responsibility for teaching and learning by the educator (Ayeni 2011; Schul 2011). The role of the educator is to help the students learn by facilitating learning in an environment that enables AL (Mathias 2014).

The benefits of AL to students include increased assimilation and understanding, increased participation, improved attitude towards the subject, increased learning enjoyment, enhanced communication skills, improved interaction, and enhanced analytical and problem-solving abilities, in addition to the development of creative and critical thinking skills (Afacan 2016; Erasmus and Fourie 2018; Gillies 2016; Kong 2014; Mathias 2014; Nouri 2016; Pereira and Sithole 2020). This thus enables students to gain confidence in learning as they tend towards becoming lifelong learners (Afacan 2016; Kong 2014; Nouri 2016; Phan 2018). However, implementing AL may be time-consuming (Frick, Birt, and Waters 2020). Educators sometimes find it difficult to implement AL because they were not taught using AL strategies while some students prefer to continue with the passive learning styles they are used to (Nouri 2016). Nonetheless, the benefits of AL far outweigh its limitations. As such, in an educational context

where the traditional approaches to teaching and learning have prevailed, this article contributes to the literature on active learning by articulating the experiences of Accounting pre-service teachers' engagement in group learning in the teaching method module.

Group work

Group work is a teaching strategy that promotes learning and socialisation among students, where they are required to work in small groups (Baloche and Brody 2017; Frykedal and Chiriac 2018; Sharan 2010). It involves students working collaboratively on set tasks (Frykedal and Chiriac 2018). A key feature of group work is that the balance of authority and control of the work at hand tilts from the educator to the students, thus enabling them to take ownership of the learning process (Baloche and Brody 2017; Frykedal and Chiriac 2018). Allowing students to work in small groups is more beneficial to them than large group discussions as it promotes participation, expression of thoughts, interdependence, interaction, collaborative inquiry, understanding, and application of new knowledge (Frykedal and Chiriac 2018, Davidson and Major 2014; Shimazoe and Aldrich 2010). Group work as a teaching strategy can also promote inclusivity by bringing together students of different abilities and backgrounds (Baloche and Brody 2017), while developing intercultural skills (Shimazoe and Aldrich 2010). Students who have difficulty talking in class may speak in a small group (Crawford and Jenkins 2018). Students who learn as a group get an opportunity to explore diverse perspectives and learn from one another in a relaxed environment (Frykedal and Chiriac 2018). When students are allowed to work together, they develop habits of collaborative learning, thereby respecting one another's voices and experiences (Davidson and Major 2014).

However, implementing group work is not always a smooth experience. There are records of resistance, threats, and aggression from students who believe that they are being held back by their slower teammates or social loafers (Jolliffe and Snaith 2017). In addition, less confident students sometimes feel they are being ignored or demeaned by their group members (Crawford and Jenkins 2018). There is also the problem of social loafing or free riders, where some students may not contribute to the group effort (Baloche and Brody 2017; Jolliffe and Snaith 2017). Some capable students react to free-riding by withholding their input on the project (Sharan 2010). Despite these limitations, allowing students to work in groups encourages active engagement in learning as they learn collectively while being enabled with the collaborative skills needed for their future workplace.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The Social Interdependent Theory (SIT) is widely used to understand learning together or collaboratively because of group dynamism (Johnson and Johnson 2002; 2017; Baloché and Brody 2017; Frykedal and Chiriac 2018). Developed by Johnson and Johnson (2002), SIT is premised on the idea that groups are dynamic and the need to attain a desired goal creates an interdependence that unites members (Johnson and Johnson, 2017). According to this theory, group members develop a degree of interdependence when working together, enhancing the probability of achieving their mutual goals (Johnson and Johnson 2002; Frykedal and Chiriac 2018). SIT proposes five elements necessary to improve the collaborative potential of groups: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing.

According to Johnson and Johnson (2002), positive interdependence exists when individuals work cooperatively to achieve the goals by believing that they can attain their goals only if the other individuals within the group also reach their goals. While it can be structured into students' work, it can also be attained through joint rewards, divided resources, or complementary roles, among others (Johnson and Johnson, 2002; 2017). In this study, in a bid to foster positive interdependence, students were required to share the tasks among themselves to attain a joint reward in the form of grades based on their submission.

Individual accountability occurs when group members are held accountable for their section of the task at hand and willingly assist other members when the need arises (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 2014; Frykedal and Chiriac 2018). A key feature of individual accountability is teammates reviewing members' work to provide feedback that will enhance the final output (Johnson and Johnson, 2017). This element can be viewed as an inbuilt mechanism to deter free-riding. Students were required to meet after the scheduled lecture periods to plan and deliberate on their submission to facilitate individual accountability.

Johnson and Johnson (2002) state that face-to-face promotive interaction occurs when members encourage each other's efforts through group discussions using both cognitive and interpersonal skills. This can be done by assisting and motivating each other on the one hand and by challenging and critiquing other members' work on the other hand (Johnson and Johnson 2017). In this study, members were required to assist one another to foster promotive interaction.

Group processing happens where members reflect on group functioning and evaluate their work process to decide on actions required to maintain the working relationships while attaining desired objectives (Johnson and Johnson 2002; 2017). Journals were given to participants to aid their reflection and documentation of their experiences.

Finally, interpersonal and small group skills enhance the degree of trust among group

members and improve their communication skills and ability to resolve conflicts when disagreements arise (Frykedal and Chiriac 2018). Even though these social skills can be developed in group work and collaborative activities, the proponents of this theory advocate that these skills be actively taught like any other academic skill (Johnson and Johnson 2002; 2017) to facilitate fruitful engagement.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Accounting Method 3 (EDAC401) is a pedagogy module for fourth-year (final) Accounting students in the Bachelor of Education programme. It is a compulsory module for pre-service teachers majoring in Accounting Education. The module explores various pedagogical approaches and assessment and its implications for the teaching and learning of Accounting. It also interrogates teaching and learning strategies and their relevance to Accounting teaching. In this module, it is crucial for the students to develop a good understanding of the scope of Accounting as a discipline, as well as its curriculum and pedagogical issues.

Students were required to work within their groups during the semester to complete their tasks outside the lecture sessions. They had to demonstrate the collaborative work done outside the classroom by doing presentations and submitting their complete tasks online. The goal was to create opportunities for students to work effectively by first working individually, to be able to actively engage in the learning process as a group. In addition, student attendance in the module was compulsory since they were required to do assignments, research, discussions and presentations in groups. Students were encouraged to work in groups of six of their choice, and different groups were formed for each task. It was left to each group to organise themselves and agree on the method of working. Students had to work collaboratively and creatively employ problem-solving skills and knowledge to solve Accounting problems.

During lectures, students were given activities and experiences that provided opportunities to engage with each other and discuss content. Instructions about each task and due dates were clearly explained to all students in class and made available through the learning site, Moodle. Other details of the tasks were communicated with the group leaders. There were four tasks in the module, and each group was required to conduct research on different topics and present it to the other groups in class using various teaching strategies, such as jigsaw. Groups were also required to take videos of their lesson presentations, view the videotapes in groups, and comment on their peers' lesson presentations. A marking rubric was provided to guide review and peer feedback. Students were also given tests and memos and asked to allocate marks. During presentations, students were required to justify the allocation of marks.

The Social Interdependence Theory provided the theoretical platform for understanding

group dynamics aimed at meaningful student interaction and engagement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach within the interpretive paradigm was adopted for the study. This qualitative interpretive research was deemed appropriate for this study as we were interested in understanding the meaning that pre-service teachers constructed in making sense of their active learning experiences (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018; Creswell 2014). A case study research was employed since the aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences of active learning in group work (Creswell 2014; Yin 2018). One of the features of a case study is its focus on multimethod data generation within the natural settings of the participants (Yin 2018).

Sampling

The study sample consists of forty randomly selected fourth-year pre-service Accounting teachers registered for a four-year Bachelor of Education programme from one South African university. These participants were doing Accounting as a major and registered for Accounting Method III, which is a pedagogy module. All 102 students registered for EDAC401 in 2019 were approached during the first lecture in the second semester. Purposive sampling was used to select the research site since we were teaching Accounting at the university where the study was conducted.

Data generation methods

Data was generated through semi-structured, face-to-face, and focus group interviews, which were regarded as the main tools to probe pre-service teachers' active learning experiences through group work. Five focus group interviews of eight members each were conducted, followed by ten face-to-face interviews. Focus group interviews lasted 45 minutes each. Two participants were selected from each group for face-to-face interviews. The duration for each face-to-face interview was 40 to 45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded. Reflective journals supplemented the interviews. All forty participants were given reflective journals to keep for one month before the end of the semester. Students were required to reflect weekly on the experiences that were significant to them. This allowed us to verify from the reflective journals whether what students were saying took place in group work, thereby enhancing the study's credibility via triangulation.

Data analysis

The data set obtained from the semi-structured interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Analysing data began by familiarising ourselves with the data through transcribing audio-data to textual data and reading the transcript several times to identify units of meaning to access the deeper meaning of the pre-service teachers' responses. Open coding was done by going through the data and identifying and assigning codes to crucial concepts (McMillan and Schumacher 2014). Categories were established, reviewed and clustered into specific themes to report findings. The themes that emerged from the interviews were used to analyse reflective journals.

Ethical issues

Ethical clearance for the project was granted by the ethical clearance office and permission to conduct the study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Informed consent was also obtained from all participants. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants' names were not disclosed.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study were consolidated into the following themes: promoting student learning and accomplishment, shared responsibility and accountability, enhancing social interactions, and variety of perspectives. Verbatim quotes are used to capture participants' responses to the questions posed.

Promoting student learning and accomplishment

Students' engagement in group work encouraged information exchange, which ensured increased individual performance compared to students working alone. Participants acknowledged that doing tasks in groups enabled them to find answers to their questions by interacting with others because group meetings and discussions were regarded as spaces for everyone to participate in the learning process. Students who had questions had an opportunity to express themselves in group discussions, where the questions were addressed. If the interaction were only limited to lectures, students, especially the shy ones, would otherwise have gone without getting clarity on their questions.

Students indicated that they were assigned difficult tasks that had never been given in other Method modules before. Because they were doing their tasks in groups, they managed to meet and make sense of the questions together. Students' interactions and discussions allowed them to use their existing knowledge to construct new knowledge. Group discussions, dialogue during meetings and social media helped them make sense of what they were required to do and what they still needed to understand or learn.

“Task 1 was new and we have never seen it before, but we met several times and other group members came with different meanings. This helped us to understand the question.” (G3)

Students found that one of the main benefits of working in a group was that it helped them submit good-quality work. Everyone worked together, making use of their best skills to produce quality output. One participant said:

“Our group leader always reminded us that our individual work contributes to good marks and the type of work we would be submitting.” (G2)

It was the responsibility of each member to ensure that the quality of the final submission was not compromised while they were working as a team. Students regarded this as one of the best benefits of group work.

While students were working in groups, every group member had an opportunity to communicate their ideas with others within the group without fear of being ridiculed. A participant from group 4 confirmed:

“We were free to present our ideas to the group; each idea was discussed. This contributed to the whole task.”

While students were exchanging ideas, all members thoroughly deliberated on each idea before the group concluded. They found that this contributed to completing their tasks. They were encouraged to learn more deeply: this increased their understanding, rather than their knowledge of the facts only. Evidently, students’ engagement in group discussions helped produce quality work, which was ultimately rewarded with good grades. The drive for high attainment could not have yielded the desired results without members’ commitment to their tasks in a supportive space, as enumerated in the next section.

Shared responsibility and accountability

Students experienced group work as a space that created a supportive team climate through shared responsibility. The responsibility of completing and submitting assigned tasks was evenly shared among the group members, with allocated sections they had to do individually before the meeting. Although each member was assigned individual work, during discussions group members supported one another.

“Each task was divided among the group members. We were expected to do much work on our own because each member had to present to the group.” (G1)

Participants mentioned that every team member had a responsibility to the group to contribute

to the assigned assessment task. They believed that teamwork became effective only when group members' participation was balanced.

Everyone in a group learned to hold themselves accountable to the other members. Students knew that all were responsible for reaching their targeted goals; therefore, they were urged to get work done individually and jointly, and encouraged to honour scheduled meetings and deadlines.

“We knew that it was upon each member to do work and other group members were adding to what you have done during our meetings.” (G5)

Sharing a common goal, students were committed to working as a team through combined effort and joint decision-making. Individual and group accountability meant that no student had to do all the work alone. Accountability also extended to attendance at group meetings and lectures. Students felt obliged not to miss a class all the time. In contrast, attendance in lectures was ordinarily poor. Besides increasing individual accountability, the supportive environment of small groups provided a safe space that also enhanced social interaction among members.

Enhancing social interactions

In a normal lecture, reticent students are frequently never afforded an opportunity to talk. Some pre-service teachers revealed that they often did not participate in lectures because they were not confident enough to express themselves in the presence of other students. However, doing work in groups created spaces for less assertive students to speak freely. Students mentioned that in their meetings, reserved students had an opportunity to voice their views and their point of view was recognised. Learning through group work enabled social interaction among participants who were reluctant and nervous to articulate views in a large lecture setting. Because students were supporting one another, they felt encouraged to talk.

“In our meeting, all group members had to report and present their allocated tasks. Students who used to sit quietly in class were talking. They raised very good points.” (G2)

“I'm shy to ask questions during the lecture; I get freedom to talk and ask questions in our group discussions.” (G1)

The participants experienced group work as a context that enabled them to take the initiative to ask questions and provide solutions, and to participate in activities. Pre-service teachers found group learning inspiring for shy students, who derived their motivation to communicate with others from group work. Through working in groups, they were able to ask questions they could not ask in class; hence, active learning was optimally enabled.

The participants believed that group work enabled the less assertive but capable students

to express their views without difficulty whenever they felt it necessary to do so. This suggests that doing work in groups extended opportunities for learning that would otherwise not have been realised for less assertive students to interact with others, if learning was only limited to normal lectures.

“We enjoyed working together, we were free to talk and other members were helping if you need more explanation.” (G1)

“I was encouraged to go and do research on my own because I knew that I was going to present my work in our group meeting.” (G4)

Some participants indicated that they were scared to talk in class because, as English was their second language, their command of English as the medium of instruction was not good enough. Group learning was found to be a learning space that provided support in allowing participants to express their views within their groups.

“I was free to talk in my groups because no-one criticised my English. Those who are speaking English very well were good at presentations.” (G3)

“Some students do not talk in class; they are scared to talk in English, even if they know the answer.” (G5)

Participants were of the view that group work helped to extend freedom of expression even though from diverse perspectives representing members with different abilities, as discussed in the next section.

Variety of perspectives

Groups were composed of members with different skills and abilities. This diversity allowed the use of different approaches to learning as members used varied methods in solving financial problems. Interactions with group members who were more capable at certain tasks gave other members an opportunity for self-improvement. Students believed that doing tasks as a group influenced their skills and talents:

“What I have noticed is that we have different approaches to learning.” (G2)

“Some of us have different skills in analysing the questions. This variety of skills was a huge benefit because we got very good marks.” (G5)

Each member was allowed an opportunity to voice his/her suggestion and to use his/her talent. Those considered good at creatively putting together group presentations were used to help the whole group improve the final submission. Those who were good at research supported the group in gathering information for enhancing their assessment tasks. As a result, students

learned from the abilities of peers, which improved their understanding and achievement in Accounting. This contributed to the quality of their final performance. Doing tasks in groups helped some members to identify their strengths, weaknesses and talents. This awareness helped to refine their approach to learning.

Working in a group enabled students to examine topics from the perspectives of others. While they were discussing and negotiating how to address the assigned tasks, they were obliged to listen to other students' ideas. They believed that their ideas influenced one another's thinking, which assisted in acquiring new information.

Students understood that they were expected to work collaboratively towards the assigned assessment tasks, and accepted other viewpoints while improving them. They viewed themselves as collaborators in assessment tasks, all collectively developing a shared, deeper understanding of the topic. The intention was often to come up with the group's final shared perspective on the solution.

“We have learnt to listen to others' perspectives and see how their views can refine your own, and the point here is not to simply change your perspective, but also to improve it.” (G2)

“In most cases ... my view is not strong and I had to change my suggestions as a result of the interaction. I am more observant than ... before the group meetings.” (G4)

Pre-service teachers believed that the diversity of the members created spaces for them to develop different analytical approaches to the problems. Some enjoyed being more active in class and appreciated the input and perspectives of peers. The advantage of discussing the tasks with peers was that they gained new viewpoints on the problem. Participants were happy that, when working in a group, each had an opportunity to share ideas and suggestions. This allowed for the generation of new methods on problem-solving and to approach the given task differently, as some of the suggestions or ideas by some of the members were innovative and novel.

Although students were content with the diversity of perspectives from other members, they were concerned that a variety of perspectives from peers often creates more confusion than clarification because people understand the question differently. On some occasions, it was difficult to reach consensus. As a result, some groups submitted work full of flaws. Furthermore, diverse perspectives gave rise to disagreements, which led to conflicts within the group. However, students indicated that doing work as a group taught them how to solve their disputes. They were also able to handle their disagreement in terms of diverse solutions, to reach consensus.

“Our lecturer taught us to resolve our disagreements as a group if we do not see eye to eye.” (G5)

On the one hand, the above findings present working with others as an avenue to harness individual skills and abilities for the common good, which is ideally sought after. On the other hand, differences in opinions and personalities sometimes reflect human interactions, which, if unresolved, hinders collective attainment.

DISCUSSION

The participants constantly referred to how doing work as a group enabled them to learn from other students. In other words, group work facilitated collaborative learning, as concluded by Frykedal and Chiriac (2018). As students shared their ideas and thoughts in their meetings, they collaborated actively (Gillies 2016) so that they learnt from one another and had their ideas moderated during deliberations in groups, thus extending their learning.

There was evidence of positive interdependence (Johnson et al. 2014) among group members, as the available resources (the assigned task) were shared among members and the group leaders made it clear that each member's output contributed to the final submission. The data suggests that, knowing they were accountable for their section of the task, the students worked hard to accomplish their targets. They also knew the rewards (grade) would be shared by the group. Collaboration was seen as a motivation to produce quality work individually while allowing for further refinement of the group submission. Johnson and Johnson (2002) assert that positive interdependence is a key driver of higher attainment, while Frykedal and Chiriac concluded that it enhances "inclusive and collaborative processes" (2018, 196).

The outcome of this study affirms the work of previous scholars (Davidson and Major 2014; Gillies 2016; Jolliffe and Snaith 2017; Johnson and Johnson 2002; Schul 2011), that group work enhances performance outcome. This positive outcome could be adduced to the fact that they tapped into the pool of resources (members' minds) at their disposal as those who were creative pulled the presentations together while the analytically minded members sourced relevant information from research. This kind of ethos is synonymous with workplace teams that leverage the individual strengths of members to achieve team goals. Besides contributing to enhanced performance (higher grades), the tendency for group work to engender higher cognitive attributes was also evident in this research as students were exposed to and did exhibit creative and analytical tendencies, as indicated above. They also had the opportunity to deliberate on individual ideas before deciding on what was incorporated in their final presentation, thereby exhibiting evaluative abilities. In essence, students' involvement in group work did not only result in high attainment but also facilitated the development of higher cognitive skills. This affirms the work of Blessinger (2017), which concluded that students

involved in group work developed problem-solving skills as well as analytical and research skills, among others.

Similar to Phan's study (2018), some groups in this research study made flawed submissions and performed poorly due to a lack of consensus on overly divergent views. This emphasises that there is a need for capable leaders within groups who actively drive and coordinate member's activities towards the attainment of group objectives. Since the appointment of leaders is considered a key ingredient in the effectiveness of any collaborative setting (Blessinger 2017; Davidson and Major 2014; Phan 2018), each group in the class had a leader. However, the results were mixed: while some ran seamlessly and delivered quality outcomes, others struggled and attained less satisfactory outcomes. Tensions within the group rendered the leader less effective, hence guidance is advised. As noted earlier, a key characteristic of small group work is a shift in classroom authority and control towards the students, thus allowing them the independence and flexibility to decide on assigned tasks while taking responsibility for their work. As desirable as this may seem, it calls for a balance in the control and working structure of group work. It is likely that the intervention of the academic and formative checks could have provided much clarity to the confused group members. Davidson and Major (2014) and Frykedal and Chiriack (2018) insist that the academic plays a key role in providing an enabling environment and scaffolding, where necessary, to facilitate group learning.

Participants acknowledge the effect group interactions had on their learning; group work created a supportive social environment in a more relaxed way, as the discussion developed in their meetings. It promoted interactions among students in a space that allowed all to engage (Johnson et al. 2014). There were evident benefits of group support, which may have made it easier for more introverted members to participate. As documented by Jolliffe and Snaith (2017), less assertive students who felt shy to participate in lectures found it more convenient to participate in this shared space. Doing work in groups offered students who find it uncomfortable to engage in social interaction a space to voice their ideas because their voices and experiences were respected in this safe space (Davidson and Major 2014; Schul 2011). Further, students who found it threatening to articulate their views during the lecture due to linguistic limitations in communicating in English, freely did so.

Interactive and interpersonal skills are key attributes for successful group learning. Using these skills, students communicate their ideas, clarify misconceptions, accommodate other viewpoints, learn from peers, influence group decisions, minimise conflicts, resolve conflicts and build relationships that sometimes transcend academic environments (Johnson et al. 2014). These skills are not only relevant in the workplace and schools, but in any space in society

where humans relate with one another. Interactive and interpersonal skills are lifelong skills that students inadvertently acquire while working in small groups. This research echoes the conclusions reached by Jolliffe and Snaith (2017) in their use of team-based learning, that HEIs fulfil their roles of developing graduate attributes associated with teamwork, communication and interpersonal skills via the small group, thus enhancing employability. However, advocates of group learning demand that students be taught basic interpersonal and group work skills and be encouraged to use them in order to ensure high-calibre learning (Johnson and Johnson 2002). The participants experienced group work as a context that enabled them to take the initiative to provide solutions and participate in activities and opportunities they missed in face-to-face lectures.

The outcome of this article is particularly intriguing in the context of Accounting Education, where the core modules were predominantly delivered in a teacher-centred, content-laden lecture mode. If these Accounting majors experienced improved attainment in their teaching method module by working in groups, academics in the core modules can take a leaf out of their book by incorporating group work and other AL strategies in their instructional programme. As indicated above, this does not only equip them with the various interpersonal and team skills necessary for them to work in schools upon graduation, but it also leads to enhanced performance. This has no doubt contributed to the clamour that has been going on for decades for a transition to more interaction and active teaching strategies in Accounting Education (Frick, Birt, and Waters 2020; Jolliffe and Snaith 2017; Sharan 2010). Even though there are concerns over the timely completion of the curriculum using group work and other AL approaches to teaching, some Accounting academics and institutions are beginning to subscribe to these strategies (Blessinger 2017; Frick, Birt, and Waters 2020; Jolliffe and Snaith 2017), albeit at a rather slow pace. We therefore add our voices to the call for a more interactive approach to the teaching of Accounting via collaborative and active learning strategies to enhance student attainment while preparing them for the workplace. It may well be the key to stemming the tide of low pass rates that has plagued the Accounting discipline for years.

CONCLUSION

In a context characterised by the traditional lecture-based pedagogical approach, this article presented the experiences of pre-service teachers engaged in active learning via small group work in an Accounting teaching method module. Participants in this study acknowledged the role of group work in assisting their learning by creating a supportive social environment that allows opportunities for active learning. Students benefited from consistent support provided by peers in the group; as such, learning and the quality of work produced was enhanced.

Engagement in small group work that is structured to ensure positive interdependence and interaction tends to enhance learning performance while developing interpersonal and social skills. Subjecting their work to both individual and group scrutiny refines the quality of the final product. As students freely air their views and correct their misconceptions within the confines of the safety of their small groups, they develop skills to listen to other students, articulate and communicate their own viewpoints, negotiate superior arguments, and resolve imminent conflicts spurred by the impending reward to attain good grades. In other words, this study revealed that, besides obtaining good grades, group work also engendered communication, social skills and interactive skills, which are highly desired in the workplace. It is for this reason that we encourage academics anchoring core Accounting modules to incorporate group work and other AL strategies in their pedagogical practices as this may in no small way impact the poor pass rate that has lingered in the discipline for years. Although students often experience conflict and disagreement due to diverse opinions, they ultimately resolved it themselves.

This article provides useful insights to teacher educators and other academics on how group work can be used in the pedagogical process to enhance students' engagement and learning while developing the interactive and interpersonal skills expected of graduate teachers. Since this article has not really delved into how students managed conflicts within their groups, this could be an area for further research. Interested researchers could also consider students' outcomes (both performance and behavioural) from a cohort of students engaged in the traditional pedagogical path with those learning in groups within the same institution or department.

Being a case study, this article has limited application, which was compensated for by the depth of the narrative.

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