Creating Synergy in Accounting Report Assignments

Gretchen N. Vik
San Diego State University

Abstract

By collaborating with the School of Accountancy, the Management Information Systems Department (which houses all communication courses for the College of Business) was able to create assignments that helped prepare accounting majors for the writing they will do on the job, meet AICPA and other expectations, fit college learning outcomes (part of AACSB accreditation), and also create synergy with writing assignments being given in accounting classes.

Working as a team, faculty from accounting and the communication professor revised the three existing integrated six-unit accounting courses and the four-unit reporting for accountants course. Designing assignments that fit into a skills-based curriculum required mapping the competencies and content of the various courses, having faculty and professionals rank these lists, stating the significant items as learning outcomes, and then designing courses that integrate the competencies into teaching materials and assignments. The process resulted in an improved curriculum and in praise from professional stakeholders.

Introduction

In many business communication classes, the professor designs the assignments based on learning objectives aimed at improving student writing in general areas such as writing clearly and concisely. Advanced report classes refine these skills and work more with specialized reporting such as press releases. In a class for junior accounting majors, our university tried a new model: developing writing assignments based on employer, governing body, and accounting department expectations and objectives.

For example, the objective of the company risk analysis report changed from "Understand the difference between description (facts) and analysis (meaning)" to "Identify economic, broad business, and financial risks of an industry/sector; competitive advantages; financial and non-financial performance. Use facts and information to create meaning and analysis rather than just list facts." Using the AICPA and other governing bodies' lists of what accountants need to know, we targeted learning most important to accounting students when they get jobs. Using assignments that include narrative and budgets, flowcharts, and accounting formats gives accounting students a simulation of writing skills required in their future careers.

In addition to writing three individual reports, three team reports, and two in-class case exams that elicit a letter or memo solving a communication problem in the Reporting for Accountants course, students write client memos on tax research findings in the six-unit accounting class with the tax segment, and memos assessing audit client risk in the six-unit class with the auditing segment. Part of the grade for these accounting class papers is based on evidence of effective communication skills.

Integrating writing and speaking in several courses rather than offering communication only as a separate course is a very effective way of improving student skills, long established by the Writing across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines movements. Emig (1988) discussed correspondences between writing and learning; Fulwiler (1981) explains that students value writing more when it is valued in the disciplines rather than just the English or Rhetoric departments; Kinneavy (1983) recommends that WAC programs combine specific discipline writing with learning general principles of argument and explanation to help students write also for general audiences; and Tchudi (1986) discusses how to help faculty learn to teach writing in content areas. Maimon (1982) has a good history of the WAC movement that includes workshops to help teach faculty how to handle writing assignments in their content areas.

We accomplished the integration of writing into content areas and adding accounting content into writing assignments by having the two departments, Accounting and Information and Decision Systems, working together to coordinate assignments and objectives.

Mapping the Curriculum

Since 1995, the School of Accountancy (SOA) has had an integrated curriculum of three six-unit upper division accounting courses and a four-unit reporting for accountants course, plus electives and other required courses. In 2006, the SOA began the process of revising the curriculum. This 2006-2007 review of the SOA undergraduate program involved faculty from the SOA, communication faculty teaching the required Reporting for Accountants course, and the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning. The intent was to design a skills-based curriculum that would become a model for continuous improvement and provide for ongoing assessment. As a professional school, the SOA is especially aware of the need to address the expectations of prospective employers both of new hires and of successful employees later in their careers. To begin evaluating the body of knowledge required, faculty began with the American Institute of CPA's (AICPA) Core Competency Framework, the Institute of Management Accountants' CMA Content Specifications, the ISACA Model Curriculum for IS Audit and Control, and the AICPA Model Tax Curriculum.

After compiling a list of 121 competencies and 104 content areas, 12 accounting faculty and 20 chosen professionals weighted each item for an entry-level graduate and an individual five years into a career. Each item was also evaluated whether it should be part of the accounting curriculum, another business or university department, participation in student and professional activities, or from life experience.

Working groups of faculty assigned the identified competencies and content areas course modules and restated them as learning outcomes. The outcomes were then sequenced into a curriculum map. Systems and technology sections of courses were strengthened, and the three six-unit integrated classes were redesigned based on the curriculum map sequences. The process took nearly a year to complete, but helped the SOA strengthen the curriculum and plan for ongoing assessment and revision.

The seven-step process used by the SDSU Center for Teaching and Learning called Mapping the Accountancy Curriculum to Re-envision Opportunities is summarized below:

- Identify lists developed by professional organizations.
- Rationalize, augment, and renumber original lists while preserving overall intent and structure.

- Determine faculty and stakeholder ratings regarding content/domains and competencies.
- Produce a matrix crossing ratings for content/domains with ratings for competencies.
- Examine the matrix and consider cells that reflect high ratings for both content/domain and competency.
- Write integrated competencies statements describing the competencies of students within a particular content area or domain.
- Sequence integrated competencies and regroup by courses. (Allen, 2006)

This reflects the scholarship of teaching and learning movement introduced by Boyer in 1990 in that it considers not just curricular issues, but how people learn and how teaching can be improved. The stakeholder input is important, as professionals' expectations tend to be "skill- or values-based rather than focused on disciplinary knowledge. " (Payne, Whitfield, & Flynn, 2002, p. 72). The AACSB (1994) also encourages schools to compare their courses to those at peer schools.

Translating Rankings into Learning Outcomes

The information-gathering and ranking processes of mapping the curriculum are extremely time-consuming, but the goal of improving courses becomes more concrete when the competencies are translated into learning outcomes and then into assignments. For example, the overall learning outcome for Managerial Accounting in one iteration of the project was *Use accounting information to create reports and analysis to assist in management decision making*. The sub-outcomes deal with decision modeling, measurement., reporting, leveraging technology, professional demeanor, problem solving and decision making, leadership, communication, project management, strategic/critical thinking, resource management, and marketing/client focus. The communication outcomes are:
- Expresses information and concepts with conciseness and clarity when writing and speaking, and
- Receives and originates direct and indirect messages as appropriate when listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

As a result, assignments in the report course need to teach conciseness, clarity, and use of direct and indirect strategies for creating letters, memos, and reports for management and clients.

Another iteration of the project developed larger goals for the SOA as in the following example:

Goal 2: Understand the methods of sharing accounting information within an organization and with external users

Accounting Communication   11/15/06
o *Prepare professionally written and oral reports for accounting related topics; demonstrate team and leadership techniques in accounting contexts*
  o *Demonstrate appropriate reporting standards and risk analysis techniques*
  o *Communicate effectively with appropriate personal demeanor demonstrating leadership and project management skills*

Integrity, Ethics and Regulation   12/1/06

- *Apply ethical rules and theories in the practice of public, private and tax accounting; maintain professional and personal integrity; comply with regulatory guidelines*
    - *Identify ethical dilemmas and apply the values and principles guiding accounting professionals*
    - *Utilize guidance from relevant organizations, including various governmental and regulatory agencies, standards boards, and professional associations*

The exhaustive detail level of all the sub-outcomes is illustrated in Appendix A: Accounting Communications (AC) Sub-discipline in Accountancy at the end of this paper. This list, like the ones for all the various areas, was compiled from the rankings of competencies and content areas. Using the new SOA learning outcomes and lists of competencies from the AICPA, IMA, and IFAC, here are the lists of learning outcomes for the Reporting for Accountants Course before and after the revision. Some of the wording deals with school requirements and course expectations for presentations, but the content and skills outcomes in the revision are clearly more meaningful to faculty, students, and prospective employers.

2005 Learning Outcomes: Since accountants spend a great deal of time communicating in written reports and oral presentations, this course is designed to improve your communication skills so you can present financial and business information more effectively. Both content (analysis of business risk, use of relevant and current sources, etc.) and execution (audience analysis, format, layout, style, clarity, diction, and proofreading mechanics) are part of your grade, but since this is a graduation writing requirement, in-class writing must attain an acceptable level for you to get a C in the course. Some learning outcomes:
- Analyze numbers' meaning appropriately for various audiences; *think* with the numbers.
- In written reports, use facts and information to create meaning and analysis rather than just list facts.
- Work effectively in teams to create written and oral reports; practice leadership skills.
- Make at least your final presentation without notes.
- Use a presentation package such as PowerPoint to create at least one set of visuals.
- Find and evaluate research sources, both print and online, for three projects.
- Using an SEC manual, create professional document content and design.

2006 Learning Outcomes: Since accountants spend a great deal of time communicating in written reports and oral presentations, this course is designed to improve your communication skills so you can present financial and business information more effectively. Both content (analysis of business risk, use of relevant and current sources, etc.) and execution (audience analysis, format, layout, style, clarity, diction, and proofreading mechanics) are part of your grade, but since this is a graduation writing requirement, in-class writing must attain an acceptable level for you to get a C in the course. Some learning outcomes:
- Analyze and interpret numbers' meaning appropriately for various audiences; *think* with the numbers.
- Identify economic, broad business, and financial risks of an industry/sector; competitive advantages; financial and non-financial performance. Use facts and information to create meaning and analysis rather than just list facts.
- Analyze the quality of information and evidence; find and evaluate relevant research sources, both print and electronic databases online, for three projects.

- Work effectively in teams to create written and oral reports; practice leadership skills.
- Make at least your final presentation without notes.
- Use a presentation package such as PowerPoint to create at least one set of visuals.
- Using an SEC manual, create professional document content and design.

The revised outcomes have given students more specific information about what is expected of them and illustrate to them how different this report course is than their past liberal arts writing courses.

Translating Learning Outcomes into Assignments

The ranking and categorizing process was very time-consuming, so to test adding the newest technology to the curriculum, an early-term reporting for accountants assignment was revised immediately.

The First Revised Assignment Was a Mixed Success

A memo summarizing and applying the information in the article to a specific business use had previously been open-ended; students could find their own accounting-related article for this assignment. This required early lessons in research, evaluating sources, where to find the most appropriate sources, and how ethically to cite them. Students seemed prepared neither to do academic research nor to apply their information to solving a business problem. Adding technology subjects to the assignment did not solve these research and writing problems, but it added valuable knowledge about current accounting technology such as XBRL. This positive effect, however, was balanced by the loss of an important aspect of the original assignment, changing the audience of the memo.

The original memo was written to an accounting professional who needed the information the student had found. A subsequent letter on the same topic was developed in teams but written and developed for a new audience. For example, if the original memo was on how a casual Friday policy might benefit a firm, the team letter could be for students on what kind of dress is expected at a professional firm. The new technology memo to a boss about the benefits of XBRL to the firm was extremely difficult for students to write for a lay audience—the subject was simply too complex for them to be able to explain it, as it was not something with which they were already familiar at work. See Appendix B for the comparative assignments.

Integrated Assignments That Reflected Other Accounting Courses Succeeded

Since 1995, students had come to the communication faculty member for editing advice at the request of the accounting professor teaching the tax segment of the second six-unit integrated accounting class. The two-part tax assignment was to write a memo to the file listing and discussing the implications of research on a tax question and also a letter to the client who had the tax question. For the tax professor, the research accuracy and interpretation were very important, but he also was concerned with writing style, clarity, and proofreading issues. He had always taught this assignment using model memos and letters so students could more easily see the type of writing they needed to do, whether to the file, or to a client.

We had used this two-audience approach in the initial memo assignment described above, as one of the skills a professional writer needs to have is the ability to use different registers and strategies for

different audiences. Accountants will understand jargon, for example, but laypeople and clients may not have a similar level of comprehension. One success of the tax assignment, which was followed by an exam asking students to write a similar memo, was to let students know that the communication faculty and the accounting faculty were all interested in writing. Students sometimes have the impression that writing is done only in certain classes, especially now that class size is growing across the university and fewer papers (or none) are assigned in many classes.

Another assignment that integrated the report course with accounting courses is the analysis of business risk. The reporting course uses a straightforward analysis of a firm based on income in its various segments, competition and market share, and ratio comparison (including industry averages) for the firm and at least three competitors. This has to be a fairly basic report since most of the students have little idea how to find the information about companies and industries, or how to compare companies other than stock price. The assignment lays out specific requirements to help them:

> DO NOT use the words Market Cap or EPS! Refer to your attached ratio comparison chart and discussion page. Using the Factiva comparative report including industry averages (the company and at least three competitors, industry averages on a minimum of three ratios not dealing with stock values), analyze how the companies compare to one another. Attach your complete ratio analysis chart, and discuss at least three comparative findings on the attachment page. You are required to include this discussion and chart comparison of financial performance using appropriate ratios and industry averages from Factiva.

Students see this assignment again in the third six-unit integrated accounting class, and are expected to use more advanced analysis this time. If they attend graduate school here, they see it a third time in the portfolio course, as it is a versatile assignment, one which is possible for less-informed students, but can be very sophisticated as students gain more research and analytical skill. It is frequently mentioned by employers in interviews, and students report that this assignment is one of the most useful tools they learn.

Conclusion

While developing assignments in a team of faculty rather than individually is much more time-consuming, it is a very useful way to learn what is important in another academic area, and what various stakeholders want our students to learn to do. In addition, it helps prepare our students more fully for the jobs they take after graduation and even five years down the road. Mapping curriculum is not for those with limited time and budget, but it improves an academic program both for accreditation purposes and for student learning.

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GRETCHEN N. VIK, Ph. D., was president of ABC in 1990, has been active in business communication education and consulting since 1975. She has taught business communication core courses, advanced reporting courses, reporting for accountants, and graduate business courses for managers and for regulatory affairs professionals.

Appendix A
Accounting Communications (AC) Sub-discipline in Accountancy
10/2/06

Overall Learning Outcome for AC
> *Prepare professionally written and oral reports for accounting related topics; demonstrate team and leadership techniques in accounting contexts*

Within particular AC course segments the following general learning outcomes will be incorporated (numbers refer to AICPA competencies – these overlap various IMA Content Areas)

1.2, 1.4	***Demonstrate appropriate reporting standards and risk analysis techniques (adapted)***

Specific concentration for instructors to develop in specific courses:

- 1.2.1.   Identifies risks of negative outcomes (including fraud)
- 1.2.2.   Evaluates controls that mitigate risk of negative outcomes through prevention or detection and correction
- 1.2.3.   Assesses and controls unmitigated risks through, for example, designing and applying tests
- 1.2.4.   Communicates the impact of identified risks and recommends corrective action
- 1.4.1.   Prepares reports with objectivity, conciseness, and clarity
- 1.4.2.   Describes work performed and conclusions reached in a manner that enhances the reports' usefulness
- 1.4.3.   Employs appropriate media in report preparation and presentation

- 1.4.4.   Employs relevant research skills
- 1.4.5.   Accesses relevant standards, rules, and other information
- 1.4.6.   Evaluates different sources of information and reconciles conflicting or ambiguous data
- 1.4.7.   Analogizes from existing rules to problems not explicitly described

- 1.4.8.   Identifies relevant information such as industry trends, internal performance history, benchmarks, and best practices

2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5	***Communicates effectively with appropriate personal demeanor demonstrating leadership and project management skills (adapted)***

Specific recommendation for instructors to develop in specific courses:

- 2.1.6.   Evaluates information in a manner free of distortions, personal bias, or conflicts of interest
- 2.1.10.   Commits to quality and efficiency

2.1.11. Manages stress and adapts to unusual demands with composure
2.1.12. Objectively considers others' professional criticism or evaluation
2.1.13. Adheres to a level of personal appearance appropriate to the environment
2.1.14. Identifies and prioritizes career and personal goals and is accountable/learns from mistakes

2.3. *Leadership*

2.3.1. Motivates others to achieve excellence
2.3.2. Rallies the support of others to accomplish objectives
2.3.3. Chairs teams or volunteers for projects
2.3.4. Values inputs and points of view of others and responds appropriately

2.3.5. Facilitates development of consensus or compromise as appropriate
2.3.6. Persuades others to a course of action by reasoning or incentive
2.3.7. Practices principles of effective governance

2.4. *Communication*

2.4.1. Organizes and effectively displays information so that it is meaningful to the receiving party
2.4.2. Expresses information and concepts with conciseness and clarity when writing and speaking
2.4.3. Receives and originates direct and indirect messages as appropriate when listening, reading, writing and speaking
2.4.4. Uses interpersonal skills to facilitate effective interaction
2.4.5. Places information in appropriate context when listening, reading, writing, and speaking
2.4.6. Selects appropriate media for dissemination or accumulation of information.

2.5. *Project Management*

2.5.1. Determines project goals
2.5.2. Prioritizes and delegates as needed
2.5.3. Allocates project resources to maximize results
2.5.4. Effectively manages human resources that are committed to the project

2.5.5. Effectively facilitates and controls the project process
2.5.6. Measures project progress
2.5.7. Takes corrective action as needed
2.5.8. Sees projects through to completion or orderly transition
2.5.9. Realistically estimates time and resource requirements
2.5.10. Recognizes situations where prompt and determined actions are needed and responds accordingly

Appendix B:
Original and Revised Technology Memos

[Original Memo Assignment]
Audience: Individual Memo: your boss, a partner in an accounting firm
Team Memo or Letter: a DIFFERENT audience, who is not an accounting expert (an important grading point of the team project is that it is REWRITTEN for a DIFFERENT audience); a client is a logical audience here.

TASK: Each team is assigned a different systems topic. Individuals each choose a different systems article (NOT a press release!) published in the past three months (Xerox a copy in case we have questions about your citations, or your team needs more information about the article's points). <u>Check with team members so each person has a different article.</u> CITE all borrowings in your memo **and** LIST the source(s) at the end.

Putting the information in context for your reader's use, apply the information in the article to the reader's likely use of it. This is not just a summary of the information in the article—it must be made useful to the reader. You may want to refer to the article for more detail; if so, attach a copy of the article for reader reference. On the due date, bring enough copies of your memo and the article for team members to see how to combine all your articles for the next part of the project.

Teams will combine your team's different articles and write a short, useful report for a DIFFERENT audience. If the audience remains internal to the company, the assignment remains a memo. If the new audience you choose is outside the company, write a letter instead.

Presentations: Teams will give an eight to ten-minute presentation on their memo/letter. Each person needs to speak, but you may choose how you want each person to be part of the presentation (panel? introducer, concluder, discussion leader, responder to questions?) Use visuals to help the audience follow along and to help them remember important information. Use NOTES, not a SCRIPT, to TELL us your information. Present the information; DO NOT READ the information. Each team needs to bring a copy of slides (printed 6/page as a handout) to its presentation. Each person in the class needs to read (from a client's or non-accounting audience's perspective) the team projects for that class; the team will then write two-five questions about each one. At the end of the presentations, you will turn the questions in as part of your participation grade.

<u>Specifics about the Two Assignments (See also Document Design and Documentation handouts.</u> Format: 1 inch margins top, bottom, right; 1.25 inch on left. 11 point Arial or 12 point Times New Roman font; use headings and other emphasis devices. May have attachments. Must have both parenthetical citations and source list at the end.
DON'T use a cover sheet. DO put your name on the memo in the usual memo place (FROM) and put your class and team number (ex.: MW4/3) in the upper right corner. Staple the upper left.

Length: Individual 1-2 single-spaced pages; Team 3-4 single-spaced pages.

Grade will be based on content, context, style, tone, audience analysis, use of emphasis, clarity, conciseness, correctness (following instructions), and proofreading as well as topic difficulty and relevance to chosen audience.

IDS 390W   Article Assignment, page 2 [New Page in Revised Version]
Assigned topics for Article Project

Each **team** is assigned an IT topic and will ultimately produce a team report in appropriate format using the various individual articles chosen. (due Sept. 27; presentations Sept. 29)

Each **individual** in a team will produce a one-two page single-spaced memo to his/her boss, a partner in an accounting firm. Each person must write about a different article (<u>check with each other to be sure your choice is unique</u>). This memo is due Sept. 13.

Professor Janie Chang, the new IT faculty member in the School of Accountancy, will be coming in to speak to us in class on August 30 about these topics.

Topics:
- Team 1: What is Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)?
- Team 2: Issues in Implementing Enterprise Recourse Planning systems
- Team 3: What is XBRL?
- Team 4: XBRL and its Most Recent Development
- Team 5: SOX and Effective Internal Control over Financial Reporting (SOX 302 and 404)
- Team 6: Enterprise Risk Management and Internal Control Framework
- Team 7: What is WebTrust?
- Team 8: What is SysTrust?

Requirements for all papers:
1. Include appropriate parenthetical citations or all borrowed words and ideas AND an alphabetical source list using MLA or APA format
2. Margins: 1.25 inch left, 1 inch right, top, bottom
3. Font: 11 point Arial or 12 point Times Roman
4. Single-spaced, with double spacing between paragraphs, and extra space before but not after headings
5. Name/Team/Class in upper right corner
6. No cover, no cover sheets, no title page

Be sure to read the entire assignment so that your information and analysis are most useful to your reader.