Using Jenga to teach accounts

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It has been acknowledged (Rhodes, et al, 2004) that: 'Creativity is not usually a nice word in the accounting and business profession', while according to Bruns, 'Research [has] shown that accounting teaching techniques [have] numerous drawbacks such as the lack of active engagement of students in the process, failure to achieve a better understanding of the realities of business, and a common solution for all students that left the instructor with problems of control over individually graded material' (p1).

From my own experience, students nowadays want to learn what is relevant to them and be involved in their own learning; they don't enjoy traditional teaching practices which are linked to the product-driven approach to curriculum theory and practice as described by Ralph W. Tyler (1949).

Accountants are knowledge- and procedure-orientated, and this tends to be reflected in our teaching of accounts. When I started my career as a tutor in FE and HE, as a dual professional I was interested in researching how I could make the financial, management accounting and audit sessions interesting for my multi-sensory learners, and to see if they would then engage and perform better. In my experience, learners have always complained that they find management accounting a difficult module to understand.

Of course, I tried initially to teach in the traditional way, but I have found from experience that learners grasp the content more quickly when interactive practices are used. Some of the management accounting concepts that I teach using Jenga include process costing, absorption costing 1&2, variance analysis, CVP and break-even analysis.

My accountancy classes are typically made up of about fifteen learners, of mixed ethnicities, some with experience of work and some without, and including both gifted and low ability learners. The ages of my learners range from 20 to 55 years.

To play Jenga, I split each class into two or three groups, and use in conjunction with the game a question and answer worksheet containing about fifteen accountancy-related questions (see below). The classroom should be laid out in a cluster format for this activity.

Jenga was invented by Leslie Scott, who was born in East Africa. The Jenga game involves 54 rectangular wooden blocks, which at the outset are assembled in the form of a tower. The participants then take turns in removing a block from below a specified level in this tower and replacing it on the top. The game continues till the tower partly or wholly collapses.

I label each block individually to match the accounting-related Q&A worksheet. My version of the game is timed at 15 to 30 minutes if it is a 15-question worksheet, hence working out at one or two minutes per question. The learner who builds the tower gets to make the first move. I will ask the learners to put together some Q&A as a plenary at the end of a session which embeds ICT and then I use it to set up a Q&A worksheet which the class will use as a recap Jenga game for the next session. To play Jenga, each group chooses a scribe who reads out the questions and writes down

their answers. The learners in each group then take turns at picking a block and answering the question, which is open to the group to answer if this learner doesn't know the answer. If the tower falls in the process of picking out a block, the group has to rebuild it and start the picking out afresh.

During the game, I get the opportunity to observe learner input, provide hints about answering the questions, and give instant feedback and praise for good effort. I also feed back to the groups at the end of the activity on how they have performed and on areas where their subject knowledge needs further recap, and give the learners the opportunity to discuss how they felt the game had progressed and their performance. I tend to give rewards to the groups that get the most answers right, such as adult stickers and chocolates, and the learners love it.

Pedagogy is a key theme in education now. The strategy of using Jenga with my learners enables me to fulfil most of the pedagogical concepts. It encourages co-operative learning between those who are gifted and those of low ability, team working and immediate feedback, embeds literacy and numeracy in the form, respectively, of note-taking and calculations, and provides for differentiation, assessment of and for learning, self- and peer-assessment, directive learning, blended learning and self-research. It develops learners' team-working, e-learning, listening, critical thinking, critical ear, problem solving, confidence and communication skills. It provides for the hidden curriculum by developing their social skills. In my experience, it engages the learners because they find it interesting and fun.

Benefits for the tutor from using Jenga as a teaching strategy include: instant feedback, observation of performance and attitudinal change, learner-led and instant self-reflection on how it went.

I have in most of my classes SEN learners in such areas as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and ADHD, and they respond well to these games, which they thoroughly enjoy.

Student feedback and my own analysis of this activity suggest that what makes it engaging for the learners is excitement, the awareness that the tower could collapse, the probability of picking out any question number on a block, and the team play. In the years that I have been teaching I haven't seen a Jenga game go wrong.

I also create other games with embedded subject knowledge, for example word-searches, dominoes, monopoly and jigsaws, and overall I have found that embedding subject knowledge into interactive games has improved the performance of my learners in terms both of participation levels and results.

I will be developing this topic further at a local university, where I will be carrying out research into shared practice as part of a Masters qualification.

References

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