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A. Abraham
University of Wollongong, aabraham@uow.edu.au

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Abstract
This paper deals with an issue of relevance to all those involved in teaching accounting from a student-centred perspective – the order in which topics should be introduced to students in an introductory accounting subject. The stated purpose of the paper is "to stimulate debate" (p. 9). In order to do this, the author presents an argument for her proposed ordering for the introduction of topics and then reports the results of her analysis of the sequencing of chapters in twenty three selected textbooks. These two distinct sections of the paper will be discussed first separately and then drawn together in the concluding remarks.

Keywords
accounting education, textbooks, sequencing, cash flows

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A Commentary on 'The Order of Teaching Accounting Topics – Why do Most Textbooks End with the Beginning?'

Anne Abraham
University of Wollongong, Australia

This paper deals with an issue of relevance to all those involved in teaching accounting from a student-centred perspective – the order in which topics should be introduced to students in an introductory accounting subject. The stated purpose of the paper is "to stimulate debate" (p. 9). In order to do this, the author presents an argument for her proposed ordering for the introduction of topics and then reports the results of her analysis of the sequencing of chapters in twenty three selected textbooks. These two distinct sections of the paper will be discussed first separately and then drawn together in the concluding remarks.

The sequencing of topics

The author's main argument is that the teaching of cash flows should be the central theme, with non-cashflow elements such as revenues, capitalisation, deprecation and provisions, being treated as "deviations" (p. 2). The author also favours investment appraisal or capital budgeting issues being treated early in the subject rather than later. The author claims that the basis for the need for a proposed re-ordering of topics commencing with investment appraisal based on cash flows is the underlying need to understand economic impacts and make appropriate decisions.

There is no argument with this underlying assumption behind teaching accounting – to demonstrate to students that the central aim of accounting is usefulness for decision-making. Indeed, this is a theme which has been addressed in course implementation reviews for over a decade (see for example Dosch, 2006 and Saudagaran, 1996) and by the structure of newer accounting textbooks (such as Birt et al, 2005; Kimmel et al, 2005; Marshal et al, 2007).

However, the author goes beyond mere decision usefulness by asserting that students require an initial and central confrontation with cash flows rather an accrual accounting concepts. She claims that such a focus is necessary because "the teaching of accounting has to deal with conflicting requirements" (p. 2). This may indeed be the case, however, the author does not provide any objective evidence for why the suggested restructuring would address this issue. Instead, she relies on the subjective claim that the suggested order is "more intuitive" (p. 1) because students often find accrual accounting concepts "counter-intuitive" (p. 2), a claim based on personal experience without any substantiation or verification. Thus, there appears no basis for the author's claim that there is "a pedagogical argument" (p. 1) for her proposed order of topics.

In addition, the author's proposed subject structure is based on a number of assumptions about what students understand "intuitively". For instance, the discussion of a "multi-period horizon" infers an understanding of accounting conventions and principles. Also a discussion of net present value and differential cash flows means that students need to understand the nature of depreciation as a tax shield, which rests upon the matching principle, a topic which is not introduced until

later in the author's scheme. Furthermore, the proposed structure introduces the measurement of profits after investment and financing decisions have been implemented, but as financing decisions are often dependent on projected profits, this is inappropriate.

In the light of the fact that this paper is subjective and premised on the author's personal experiences, it is appropriate to add that my personal experience has been that students easily understand the matching principle and this provides an excellent basis for revenue recognition which logically flows to an understanding of accrual accounting. It also makes it easier for students to appreciate absorption costing and the changes in inventory that will occur, situations which are not as clear if a cash-based approach is originally adopted, without the parallel introduction of accrual accounting.

A further issue that is not clear, but needs to be illuminated, is whether the discussion is, in reality, about introductory finance rather than introductory accounting, and whether the author perceives a difference between the two. The arguments in the paper have considerable merit as a basis for introducing finance to students. This issue is directly relevant to a discussion of the second part of the paper and the textbooks selected by the author for analysis.

The survey of accounting textbooks

There are two issues that need to be considered here: the sample and the method. The stated theme of the paper is the ordering of topics in introductory accounting, yet almost half the textbooks selected are not introductory texts, but rather management or cost accounting textbooks, which assume that students already understand the building blocks of accounting introduced in an earlier text. This is the case for at least eleven of the twenty three texts (Atkinson et al, 2001; Drury, 2004; Eldenburg and Wolcott, 2005; Horngren, Bhimani et al, 2005; Horngren et al, 2006; Horngren, Sundem et al, 2005; Needles et al, 1999; Russel et al, 2002; Seal et al, 2006; Upchurch, 2002; Weygandt et al, 2005). In addition, at least two of these authors (Horngren and Weygandt) have also written introductory accounting textbooks (with multiple editons) which would been more appropriate choices.

Since the sample is inappropriate, the "research" is flawed. By definition, the order of will be different in these eleven books! Capital appraisal is often treated as an extension of management accounting and so will be covered in these books, whereas it may not be included other introductory texts. Thus, the predominance of management and cost accounting books in the sample means that the "results" in Table 4 are obvious because of the biased sample. The author "found" that "books that have less than two-thirds of chapters on managerial accounting content always have investment appraisal in the final part of the book" (p. 7), another direct result of the nature of the sample. Also, directly flowing from this is the "finding" that "textbooks with a heavy dominance of managerial accounting presented investment decisions early" (p. 8).

This combination of introductory and non-introductory textbooks in the sample does not provide support for the author's argument. If anything, it leads one to speculate whether the author is really talking about introductory accounting at all, but rather an introduction to management accounting (or to finance as mentioned previously). If

the latter were the case, commencing with "investment appraisal based on cash flows" (p. 1) indeed would be a logical place to start.

The method used in this survey was to divide book chapters into quartiles, and then to describe in which quartile various topics were found. The stated aim of this description was to compare the actual sequence adopted by the texts. The author attempted to demonstrate statistical analysis rather than pure description by introducing a regression equation, but the finding is unsurprising given the nature of the sample. Furthermore, it is uncertain what is trying to be accomplished by undertaking this survey, and what weight it adds to the author's argument for a change in ordering of topics.

Concluding remarks

The author is to be commended for her attempt to approach accounting from a student-sensitive perspective. This is what we should all be aiming to do in our teaching. However, consideration should also be given to the fact that in today's society where an increasing number of individuals are shareholders, students are more sophisticated than in previous generations. Many of them are used to reading financial statements and looking at market data, but require an understanding of the basic building blocks of accounting to help them understand these statements better. Thus financial statements and accrual accounting may still be a better commencing point than cash flows.

Whereas there may be a basis for a consideration of a change in the order of treatment of topics in accounting textbooks, the argument in this paper has a number of weaknesses that need to be addressed. Two of the major ones are subjectivity and lack of supporting evidence, and the inappropriate sample of texts upon which the empirical section was based.

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