

Reflections on Designing and Teaching a Communication Module on the **Art of Asking Questions** for Accountancy Undergraduates using the **Constructivist Approach**

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Purpose of Presentation

- Discuss our **experience in designing and teaching a communication module** on the '[Art of Asking Questions](#)' for undergraduate accountancy students in a local university in Singapore.
- Highlight challenges and gains in developing and teaching such a course, contextualized for students training to be accountants and auditors, given the facilitators' non-accountancy backgrounds and learners' different levels of exposure to the craft of interviewing (as interviewers) in Accounting.

Methodology

- Assess **learning objectives** against students' **end-of-course evaluation**
- Survey **students' responses in their reflection assignments** to capture insights into **learners' perspectives** on the **effectiveness and practicality** of the communication module.

Presentation Outline

Constructivism

Constructivism as a theory of knowledge, learning and teaching



The module and the learners – considerations and requirements



FEEDBACK

Learners' feedback and reflections



Faculty's reflections

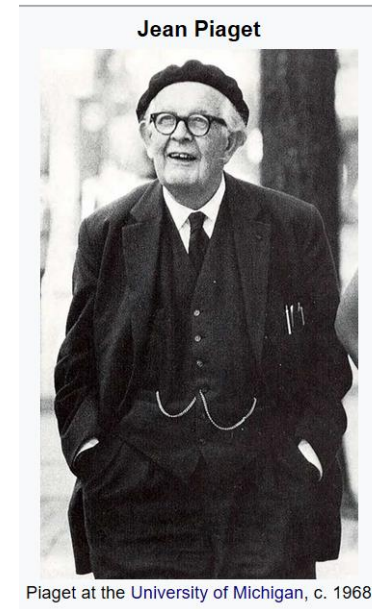


Q&A

Constructivism

Cognitive Constructivism

Social Constructivism



Jean Piaget



Lev Vygotsky

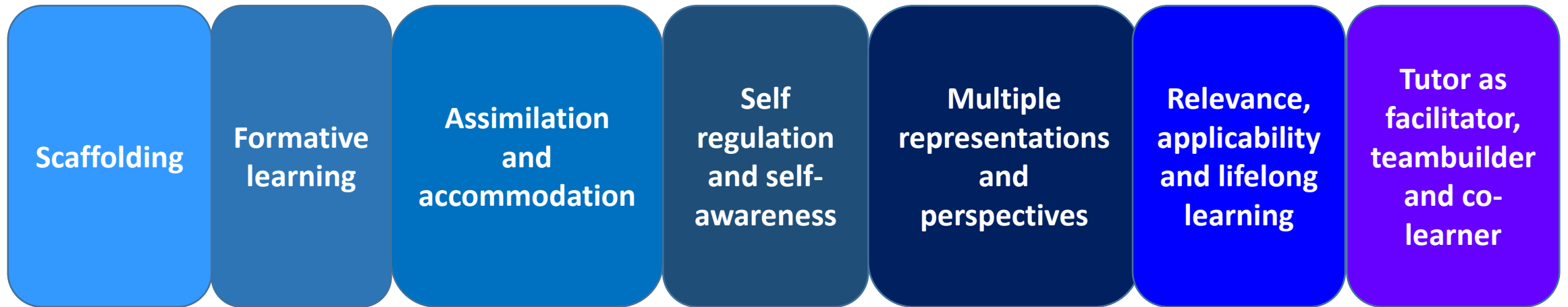
Constructivism at a Glance

- **Knowledge** changes with experience; hence, it is **dynamic**.
- **Learning** takes place when students build on **prior knowledge**.
- **Assessment** is **formative**, including students' observations and points of view, where the **process of learning** is **as important as the product**.
- Students work primarily in **groups**, as knowledge is constructed in a **social context**. Learning, therefore, results from **interaction** (and language usage), making it a **shared**, rather than an individual, **experience**.
- **Teacher facilitates** to encourage **interaction** and **negotiation**.

Nature of the Constructivist Classroom

- Contextual, meaningful and diverse range of activities that foster collaboration, dialogue, questioning, experimenting, thinking-doing-reflecting and problem solving.

Module Design - 7 Pedagogical Considerations



The Art of Asking Questions Module

- **Compulsory value-added program (VAP) for SIT Bachelor of Accountancy degree students**
- **Aim** is to help students hone their **questioning and interviewing skills**
- Total number who have gone through the module (2018-19): 20 students (max) x 22 classes
- Offered to all ACC students - Year 1 to Final Year
- No pre-requisites required
- 3-hr tutorial class x 6 weeks
- Facilitated by faculty from the **Centre for Communication Skills**
- Course assessment: **written critique, module quiz, role-play assignment, class participation** and **reflective essay**
- Pass/Fail module – passing grade set at B-; required to pass all assignments

Learning Outcomes

After completing the program, learners should be able to:

- **Identify and describe key competencies of an effective interviewer**
- Use the '***T-E-L-L***' (*trust-enthuse-lead-look*) **approach** to facilitate an interview
- Analyse the context and **choose effective ways to build rapport** during interviewing
- **Appraise questioning techniques** and **apply them purposefully**
- **Plan, perform and steer an interview** towards its goal
- Differentiate and **use information** for **corroboration** purpose.

Learning Activities

Week	Tutorial Topics
Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Overall competencies of an effective interviewer- Different types of interviews- Pre-, during and post-interview considerations- The 'T-E-L-L' (trust-enthuse-lead-look) approach to interviewing
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Build 'trust' and 'enthusiasm'<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Ways to build trust and rapport○ Understanding and differentiating non-verbal cues○ Dealing with pre-conceived notions and personal biases○ Active and reflective listening○ 'Mirroring' to build rapport
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 'Lead' and 'look' through effective questioning- Different questioning techniques<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Closed-ended and open-ended○ 5W1H; 5-why and what-else○ Contrary evidence; Self-appraisal○ Continuum; Probing; Rhetorical- Question types to avoid

Learning Activities

Week	Tutorial Topics
Week 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Types of evidence:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Physical; Documentary; Testimonial- Corroboration of data collected- Keeping the interview on track- Dealing with:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Generalized response○ Short response○ Digression
Week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Emotional self-control<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Emotion versus behavior○ Overcoming fear and anxiety in new and trying situations- Understand others<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Dominant social/working styles○ Working with different social styles
Week 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Role play assignment

Student Course Satisfaction Score

Question 5: Overall, I am satisfied with this module.

Trimester / Academic Year	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
T1 AY17-18	4.00	5.00	4.58
T3 AY17-18	2.00	5.00	4.24
T1 AY18-19	4.00	5.00	4.50
T3 AY18-19	3.00	5.00	4.38

Comments/Extracts from Students' Feedback Surveys and Reflection Assignments

Scaffolding

- “...this module has gone beyond my expectations, as its *learning pedagogy included content lectures and application opportunities through in-class activities and assignments*. More importantly, it built on students’ people skills, to foster more meaningful relationships.”
- “The *lecture notes were thorough, giving detail where needed*. For example, there were several elaborative slides on the T-E-L-L approach, which stretched into different lectures as well. The notes had *sufficient information to enable a student who had not taken the module to understand effective tips to conduct better interviews*. Students are required to fill in blanks during the lecture.”
- “Class activities during lessons were very helpful in enabling me to better understand the lessons taught.”

Scaffolding

- “*Activities* incorporated into the weekly lessons *supplemented the content covered* in the lecture slides, by providing *opportunities for application of concepts taught*. Lectures, though they provide information, are best taught memorably through real-life application opportunities. This *enables students to revise the concepts learnt* in class and *apply them* to the activities. One of the few examples would be the *in-class activity on the roleplay of a fraud investigation*. To uncover the truth, students had to recap methods of interviewing – such as the 5-*’Why’s and clarifying questions, to obtain useful information from the interviewee, from the previous lecture*. These provided on-the-spot revision and made us strategically think which questioning strategy would be most effective.”

Formative Learning

- “I feel that the *assignments* are useful as it *refreshes our memory on the concepts taught over the six weeks*. I find the *first assignment* especially helpful as it *helps to develop our analytical skills* better. The need to pinpoint what went wrong in an interview and suggest recommendations for improvement during the critique helps me to be a better professional interviewer and this assignment helps us as students to be a better interviewer as a whole. Next, I like the way *assignment 3* is structured as it *enables me to be more creative* and analytical. In making up a company to be used for the purpose of an audit interview, it *helps me to develop creativity and think better*, as well as to *apply the right audit knowledge in the assignment*. This *helps to hone my understanding* better.”

Formative Learning

- “The *written critique* allows me to have a rough idea of what is expected for the roleplay assignment.”
- “The *assignments* played a similar role to the in-class activities, allowing opportunities for application. The first assignment, for example, required students to critically analyse the effectiveness of an interviewer. This *pushed students to recap content learnt and apply and elaborate their understanding on the relevant points. Feedback enabled us to learn where we had areas for improvement.* Thus, through the opportunity for application of concepts learned in class, this module ensured that students can better understand the practicality of the areas covered.”

Assimilation and Accommodation

- *“While crafting a draft for the roleplay assignment, I was unaware that most of my questions had the excessive and habitual use of “Can you tell me ...” and “Do you know ...” at the beginning of questions. Only after receiving feedback, did I notice my flaw. I recalled that on my first Integrated Work Study Programme (IWSP) stint as an audit intern, there were several instances where I was simply unable to ascertain more information about a project from the client due to this same issue. Unbeknownst to me, I had painted the impression to others that I was merely seeking confirmation and not an elaboration by them. Moving forward from this learning point, I shall be more mindful of my questioning strategy and improve on my weakness. Replacing close-ended questions with open-ended ones like “Tell me...” and “Please explain to me...” may encourage interviewees to be more spontaneous and offer more information. I appreciate that this module has provided me with a self-improvement opportunity.”*

Assimilation and Accommodation

- *“After the role-play session, the tutor gave me very constructive feedback regarding my approaches. He told me that, “Although leading questions are appropriate in such a scenario, you should use other questioning methods such as continuum or what else, because too many leading questions may result in the data being biased as interviewees may give information that you would want to hear.” After receiving his feedbacks, it shows how inexperience I was and there is much more for me to learn. I have also **learnt that we should not solely have leading questions because the interviewee may know that I am trying to drive towards a specific answer and he may just give that particular answer or ‘textbook answers’.** Instead of just leading questions, I should **incorporate continuum questions which allow the interviewee to think and explain their point of view.** Furthermore, **asking what else questions allow us to have a better understanding of the situation as well.”***

Self-Regulation and Self-Awareness

- *“I found out I had a flair for paraphrasing during the in-class discussion on paraphrasing. Throughout the activity, I did not find paraphrasing difficult as I could come up with a few variations of answers based on the reply from my interviewee to confirm my understanding.*
- *“I should work on noticing body language, as I was almost unable to catch the fidgeting by my interviewee during Assignment 3 in this area.”*
- *“Next, active listening was an area I had difficulty with. During the roleplay, I found myself thinking and looking at the next question as I already predicted the answers given. On top of that, distractions hindered my attempts to listen attentively. This resulted in the failure to identify some of the key points which could have contributed to a fulfilment of the interview objective....I am still an ineffective interviewer as I am easily distracted.”*

Self-Regulation and Self-Awareness

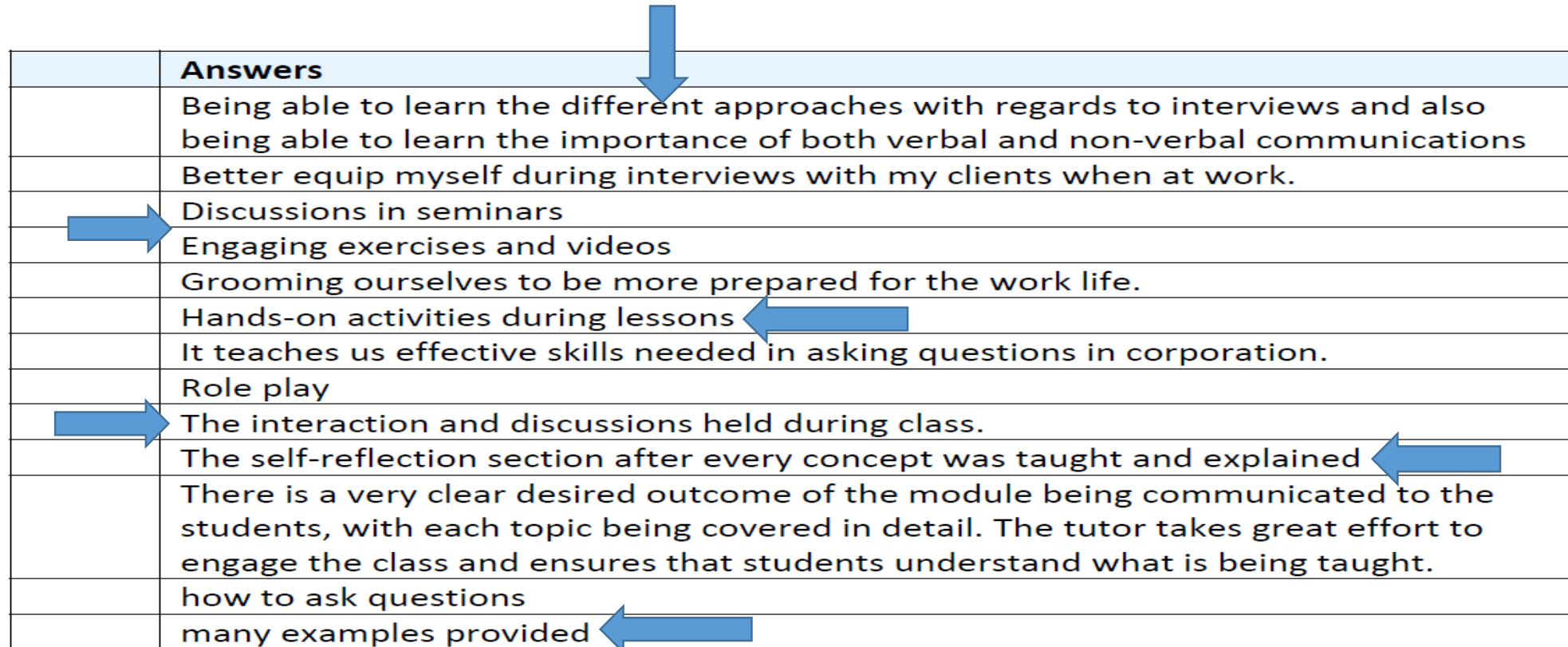
- *“During my role play assignment, I also learned that asking and designing questions in theory is very different from asking in person. When roleplaying as an interviewer, I planned my questions in advance with the expectation of getting the answers I want. However, the **roleplay showed me that getting the interviewee to give all the answers I want in the beginning is impossible. I had to improvise on the spot by probing further or ask leading questions to get the answers. I also learned the concept of ‘flexing’,** whereby as an interviewer, I need to be aware of the social style of others so that I can adapt and change to the most comfortable style for the person whom I am communicating with. This also helps me minimize frictions or miscommunications so that interviewees would become more willing to provide better answers.”*

Multiple Perspectives and Representations

- “Truth be told, I came into this class with zero expectations and I am honestly surprised at how much I learn. The smaller class size really contributed to the *conducive learning environment* as *everyone had a chance to participate equally in class*. As the only student with no IWSP experience *hearing the seniors share their views and opinions really helps* to relate the theoretical side of this module against those of their personal experience.”
- “*Conducting peer to peer interview allows student that has no working experience to be able to experience what an interview is like*”
- “I had the *chance to interact with people I don’t usually have conversations with*. It allowed me to work on my people skills.”
- “...class activities throughout the past few weeks allowed the students to put in action the various skillsets that was taught. There were *enough class activities to keep the students busy* until it was time to end of the lessons.”

Multiple perspectives and representations

Question 5: What aspects of this module do you like?



	Answers
	Being able to learn the different approaches with regards to interviews and also being able to learn the importance of both verbal and non-verbal communications
	Better equip myself during interviews with my clients when at work.
→	Discussions in seminars
	Engaging exercises and videos
	Grooming ourselves to be more prepared for the work life.
	Hands-on activities during lessons ←
	It teaches us effective skills needed in asking questions in corporation.
	Role play
→	The interaction and discussions held during class.
	The self-reflection section after every concept was taught and explained ←
	There is a very clear desired outcome of the module being communicated to the students, with each topic being covered in detail. The tutor takes great effort to engage the class and ensures that students understand what is being taught.
	how to ask questions
	many examples provided ←

Source: Student end-of-course survey, T1 AY1819

Relevance, applicability and life-long learning

- “Overall, I really enjoyed going through this course and learned a lot. I would definitely *be able to apply the knowledge* here *in my prospective audit career*. The art of asking questions can also be *applied to other situations in life* when communicating with loved ones, colleagues, friends and even strangers. *Knowing how to adapt and change our approach and mindset* when reacting to the people around us would definitely benefit our relationships in the long run.”
- “The assessments given to the students are very relatable and *prepare students to be work-ready in the future.*”
- *The lessons are useful ...in preparing us for work.*”

Relevance, applicability and life-long learning

- *“All in all, I felt like this module has been constructed pretty well and is simply the best elective I have taken so far in SIT. It is **not only useful for school and work**, but in **our personal life** as well. The art of asking questions is so underrated, the same as the focus on soft skills in school. I felt like the school focuses so much on the hard skills and this is one of the rare modules that teaches us some soft skills like our interpersonal skill. The ability to ask good and effective question is very useful and can greatly **improve** on **our social life** as well. Overall, I am thankful to have taken this module and it has been a wonderful experience for me so far. “*
- *It allowed me to **think deeper about the questions I ask, whether its to friends, colleagues or clients**, and how I can go about constructing the questions in a more effective manner.”*

Tutor as facilitator, team-builder & co-learner

- “...enjoyable lesson and impressive *willingness to improve!*”
- ...engaging with students ...*Makes sharing of answers more comfortable.*
- Thank you for *putting effort to understand my character* and making lessons enjoyable.
- ...*does not put the person who answers the question incorrectly down.*
- never fails to *garner the participation of all...students during class...incorporated many activities and examples to allow...students to obtain a better understanding of the topic at hand*”.
- affable and strongly encouraged us to participate in class activities to *boost our confidence in speaking up.*

Faculty's Reflections



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Faculty's Reflections

- Role-Play activities pose challenges to some students

(Retny, Jayaputra, & Ratminingsih, 2017)

- Use of observation as tool to assess behavior might be affected by fallible human judgements

(Adams & Mabusela, 2014)

- Other skills involved (e.g. writing a critique) in the assignments were not emphasized

- Too many assignments for a 6-week pass/fail module

Faculty's Reflections

- Learners of **diverse backgrounds** and **levels of proficiency** can benefit from the same program through **structuring the curriculum** to provide **adequate and calculated scaffolding** for learners who need it, without holding back the rest.
- In the constructivist setting, **learning** is **fostered by negotiation and dialogue** through contextual, meaningful and engaging activities, **reinforced through practice and feedback**.
- An **effective relationship between facilitators and learners** is **instrumental** in meeting the goals of the constructivist classroom.

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Thank You

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Q & A

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