Using Netsuite in Business Curriculum

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Companies continue to increase their use of cloud-based software to process transactions and grow their business. Preparing business students to enter the workforce with experience in these programs seems essential, but how do we add this skill to our curriculum? This study evaluates the process and outcomes of using a cloud based software, NetSuite, in a cased based pedagogy environment for accounting information systems students. Students were evaluated on their outcomes and surveys regarding their experiences. Overall, the study found that students were more engaged in the process, had a positive learning experience and obtained skills that employers seek.

INTRODUCTION

According to the The Pathways Commission, "The practice of accounting is changing rapidly. Its geographic reach is global, and technology plays an increasingly prominent role. A new generation of students have arrived who are more at home with technology and less patient with traditional teaching methods. All this is occurring while many accounting programs and requirements have remained constant, and accounting curricula have evolved with limited commitment or agreement about the core learning objectives. Vital programs, courses, and approaches require systematic attention to curriculum and pedagogy and opportunities for renewal." (Pathways, 2012, pp 12-13)

It is difficult to incorporate innovation and technology into curricula due to lack of time, resources, and faculty development. Many schools are slow in adapting and integrating these systems into their business curricula, they perceive the integration of ERP software into curricula to be too complex, and the resulting costs to outweigh the benefits derived (Bradford, 2003). This is further complicated when the college is small and so is the budget.

Accounting curricula and pedagogies should inspire students to continue into the accounting profession and become successful in their careers. There is also a significant gap between academic instruction and professional practice. The problem is not limited to what individual IT tools are used, but how IT is integrated into courses and across the curriculum. Taking the initiative to redesign and add a cloud based ERP software to class, could result in a successful result for students and their future employers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a significant amount of research conducted over the past several years focused on the integration of ERP into business school curricula. However, most research seems to be in regards to information technology courses and using ERP systems in a more technical nature. This study looks at the

integration of ERP into an accounting course, accounting information systems, at a small liberal arts college. The focus is on teaching students about the processing and understanding transactions across the organization and using the data that it produces.

Previous research suggests that knowledge of ERP concepts is more important than skills with any particular ERP package (Strong et al, 2006). This is crucial because while larger schools may have the resources to add complicated commercial ERP solutions, like SAP into their curriculum, this was not an option in my study. Therefore, the availability and the ease of use with the NetSuite software makes it a very good choice to use in this classroom study.

One of the major reasons for incorporating ERP systems into the classroom is to give students the skills they need in new technologies so that they can get better jobs when they graduate (Webster, 2003). While it is true that most Fortune 500 already implemented ERP systems, the next wave of growth is the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) market and industry-specific solution market. Thus, the fundamental ERP skill set is still in demand by employers (Bradford, 2003).

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Today's students have had limited access to experiences in the business world. Although internships and work experiences are always emphasized in degree programs, they often lack substance and miss the mark on exposing students to the entire accounting information systems process. Since most businesses use ERP systems today and these ERP systems focus on integration across business functions and departments, do business students need to acquire the skills of using an ERP software program in the classroom?

Would it be possible to give students access to an ERP software system, one that businesses actually use, and design an accounting information systems class around it? Would students in this class achieve the desired outcomes of obtaining certain skills related to an ERP system?

METHOD

This paper discusses the use of NetSuite for teaching hands-on ERP skills at a small liberal arts college. NetSuite Academy was researched and reviewed and was determined to be a good fit for classroom application for the Accounting Information Systems course. This course is currently taken by accounting majors in their junior or senior year and there were 20 students in the study.

NetSuite overcomes two of the hurdles that colleges must overcome in order to implement an ERP software into the classroom: money and teaching materials. The use of the software is given to students at no cost for 90 days, provided the professor becomes a certified user of NetSuite. This certification process involves online training for approximately 40 hours, which can easily be done during the summer. Since NetSuite has already been adopted by several institutions, learning modules are already developed for use with students.

NetSuite, is a cloud based computer software system, so it can be used anywhere the internet can be accessed. This makes it very efficient for use in and out of the typical classroom setting. There is not a requirement for a computer lab, or for software to be installed. Students need a laptop, PC or Mac, and the internet.

NetSuite preloads the software with data that correlates with the learning modules so it is easy to startup by the instructor and easy to use by the student. The modules that were used were: #1 overview and company setup, #2 chart of accounts and journal entries, #3 item creation and purchasing cycle, #4 forms and revenue cycle, and #5 NetSuite perspective. These five modules encompassed most of the basic accounting cycles along with CRM, human resources, and reporting.

The objectives of adding the NetSuite ERP software to the class were to develop an experiential learning experience for the students, for students to gain an understanding of the concepts and benefits of an ERP system, and to develop technical skills and experience in using the ERP software.

For data collection, two standardized questionnaires were administered manually to all 20 students participating in the AIS class. The first questionnaire was administered before the ERP software was introduced into the classroom. It focused on the experience and knowledge with an ERP system and whether the students had performed specific transactions in an ERP system. All 20 students completed the survey.

The second questionnaire was administered after the completion of the last module in NetSuite. It contained the same questions as the first questionnaire as well as questions related to the student's learning experience. All 20 students completed the survey.

RESULTS

The results of the two questionnaires proved to be positive indicators to prove the hypotheses. It was possible to give students access to an ERP software system, one that businesses actually use, and it was incorporated into an accounting information systems class. Students were asked on the before questionnaire if they had ever used an ERP system, while three answered yes, seventeen answered no. See table 1. They were also asked both before and after about how comfortable they are with using an ERP software. Fifteen out of twenty students answered 1 on the first questionnaire, indicating that they were not comfortable at all with using an ERP system. See table 2. This proved that students do have limited access to experiences in the business world related to ERP systems. Since they are not getting this experience with internships and work experience, business students need to acquire the skills of using an ERP software program in the classroom.

TABLE 1
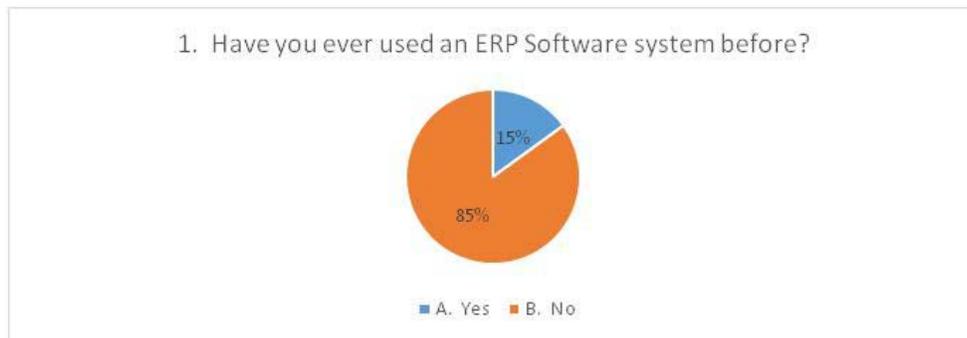
TABLE 2
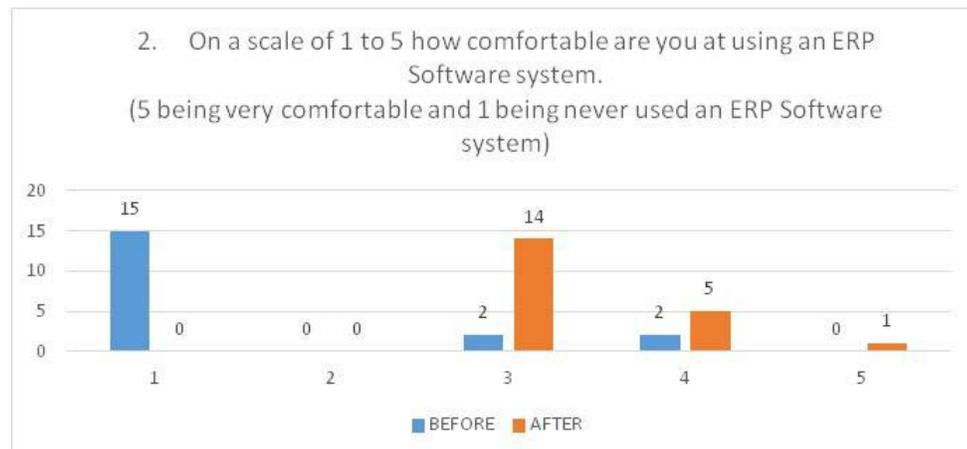
It appears that students in this class did achieve the desired outcomes of obtaining certain skills related to an ERP system. This is demonstrated in the questionnaire questions asking them how familiar they were with 10 different tasks that can be performed in an ERP system. Only 1-6 students were even familiar with the processes, but after using NetSuite and completing the 5 modules, 17-20 students were familiar with them. See table 3.

TABLE 3
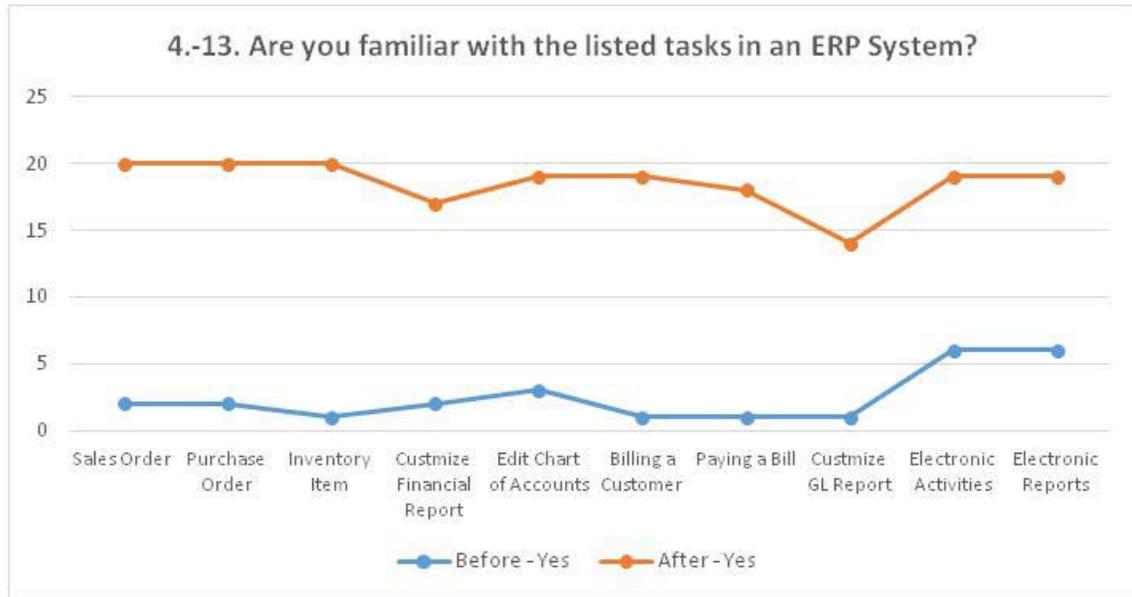
Successfully obtaining ERP skills can also be demonstrated by the quality of work that the students turned in and the grade they received on their modules. Since students had to setup their own company and use their own name as the administrator, as well as had their own user name and password, it was easy to see that each student prepared and turned in their own work.

Finally, the students viewed their experiential learning experience in a positive way. They were engaged in the process end enjoyed using the ERP software. All of them believe that their experience with NetSuite will help them with their business careers in the future. See Tables 4 and 5.

TABLE 4

TABLE 5

17. Do you believe that using NetSuite in this class will benefit you in your internship and/or job search?

0%
100%

■ Yes ■ No
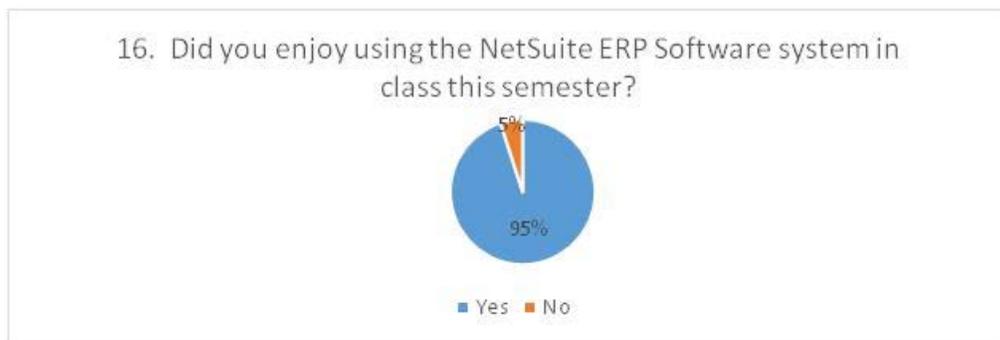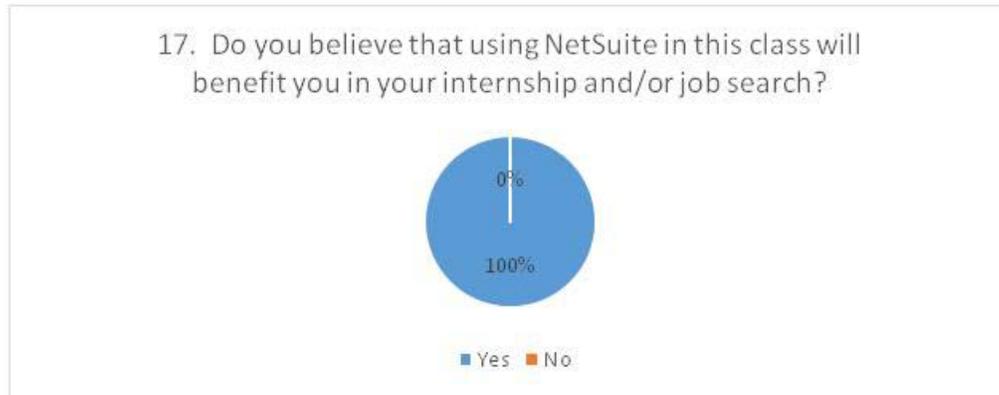
Students were also asked to take pictures of themselves using NetSuite if they wished. Several of the students did submit pictures that depicted them working on their modules in their apartment, the library, study rooms, and the cafeteria. This was a good indicator that they were utilizing the cloud when using the software and were able to use NetSuite anywhere they wanted to. There were no issues of technical difficulties or IT problems reported by any student, and only two students came to office hours for assistance in understanding how to use the software.

DISCUSSION

According to Gartner Research in 2009, enterprises around the world have purchased the SaaS (Software as a Service) product to a level of almost 7.5 billion US dollars, with ERP systems making up 1.23 billion of that. (Lenart, 2011). Nowadays, the ERP system is the "paradigm of organizational computing" (Bradford, 2010) and is referred to as "the set of activities that managers used to run the important parts of an organization such as purchasing, human resources, accounting, productions and sales" (Bradford, 2010).

Delivering ERP software through the cloud offers speed of implementation and lower costs of entry and is the latest delivery method of software. NetSuite is one of the many companies currently offering Cloud ERP, which is what made it easy to implement into the accounting information systems class.

Accounting students are very computer-literate as they have always used personal computers and had access to the internet, not to mention all the time they spend on their smart phones and tablets. Therefore, once they began the hands-on experience with the ERP system, they learned the system and its core concepts very quickly and with very little technical difficulties.

Students responded positively with their experience stating, "It was great to use a computer in the class and work with a program that will move us into a more technological workforce", and "I really learned a lot about ERP software. Much more than I would have just learning from the textbook and I will use this in real life."

CONCLUSION

Overall, the study found that students were more engaged in the process, had a positive learning experience and obtained a skill that employers seek. Consideration should be given in adding components of NetSuite into financial and managerial accounting as well as intermediate accounting.

These findings also suggest that perhaps all business majors could benefit from this experience and it should not be limited to accounting majors. Finance, marketing and management majors will also be

exposed to ERP business processes at their future employer or at their future clients and they could put this NetSuite experience in their toolbox of skills as well.

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