

Updating Graduate Business Curricula: Incorporating Experiential Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Business Schools across the United States have evolved slowly from “Chalk and Talk” pedagogical designs to that of the incorporation of cases to bring the “real world” examples into the graduate business classroom. Unfortunately, cases are typically unidimensional and they often focus specifically on one academic topic. Thus, if the course is a class in Marketing, students can be assured that the case assigned to them for this class is about Marketing and not about any other business topic! Graduates of business colleges today enter the work force with the misconception that managers will face only one challenge at a time and it will be singular in nature. The concept of a multi-dimensional problem is a complete anathema and their skills learned in graduate school do not adequately prepare them for the “real world” of business.

While cases do have merit in some academic situations, experiential learning techniques have provided a new avenue for reflection and incorporation into the business curriculum. Experiential exercises range from warm-ups, to field trips, and even in-class puzzles. These approaches convert the lecture format class to that of the flipped classroom where students study prior to class and enter the classroom ready to “experience” a relevant learning exercise. The most realistic modality for experiential learning is to incorporate an actual consulting project within each course of a graduate MBA program.

This paper addresses the successes by one academic institution incorporating team-based real consulting projects into the MBA curriculum. The first section addresses the history and evolution of experiential learning as a pedagogical entity; the second section describes the mechanics of the consulting project as it is incorporated into the MBA program; and the third section is a reporting of the success of the program as perceived by the recent graduates of the program.

Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Experiential Learning Theory

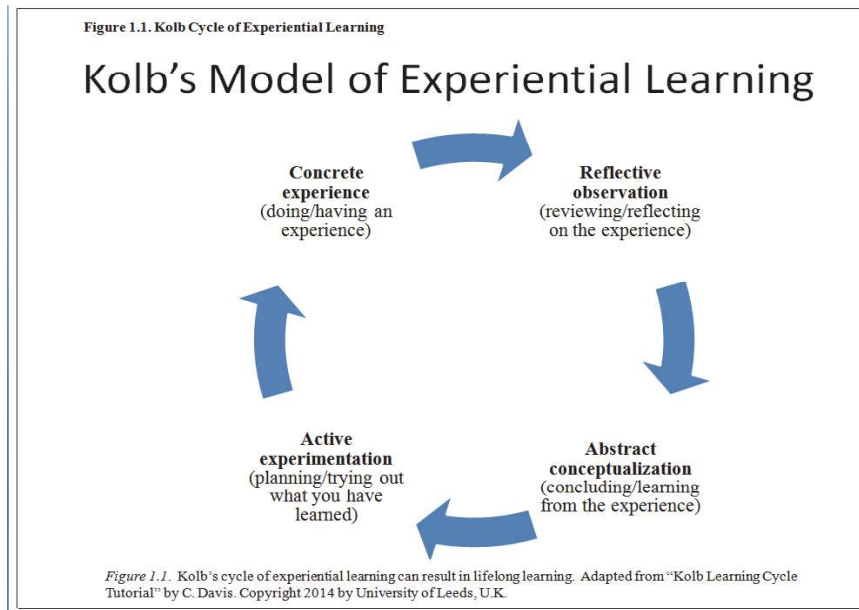
There are many well-documented theories that show that experiential learning in higher education can develop better learning, than passive and rote approaches. To date, much research has been conducted on experiential learning as well as its application to university curriculum. Kosnik's research (2013, p 613), states,

“The traditional academic model that removed business students from the real world, into the “safe” classroom environment of theory-driven lectures without real world experience, no longer offers adequate preparation for decision-making and competitive performance in a global marketplace.”

The theoretical foundation of this study will examine the roots of experiential learning theory itself, in order to make the case for the use of experiential learning techniques by faculty within the context of fully employed MBA programs across universities. The foundational theories of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Knowles and Kolb are presented, in order to examine the value of the experiential application by faculty members teaching in the MBA programs in the selected universities.

Dewey is considered one of most influential educational thinkers of the twentieth century and has been rightly given credit for his theoretical concepts “justifying a shift from prevailing authoritarian teaching methods to more progressive education and pedagogical methods that involve a “learning by doing” experiential approach to education” (Dewey, 1938). He further explained that the educators must make distinctions between experiences as some experiences are educationally worthwhile and others are not. In other words, there should be discrimination between a good experience and a bad experience. In addition, education is a social process and the development of experience comes about through interaction with others. Piaget developed a stage theory of cognitive development. His four stages, the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage, try to explain how children try to understand the world. He came to the conclusion that learning is an active process (Lavatelli, 1973) and understanding a new experience grows out of a previous learning experience. Vygotsky developed a theory that was somewhat different from Piaget's theory in the sense that it described the contribution of the society and culture in the development of mental processes. He argued that learning precedes development and not vice versa. He also developed an important concept called “zone of proximal development.” This concept explains how an instructor can help a student reaching the next level of learning experience. Kolb & Kolb (2005) based their theory of experiential learning on the above theories by Dewey, and Piaget, and emphasized the role of experience as a source of learning. They explained how knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. D.A. Kolb's cyclical model of learning includes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation and is very well respected. This theory of learning starts with the learner actively experiencing an activity and ends with trying to test the model in a forthcoming experience.

FIGURE 1
KOLB'S MODEL OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING



Knowles's work (1980) developed the adult learning theory that he termed andragogy. He explained that adults are self-directed and explained the importance of creating a positive environment in the classroom. Knowles also explained why previous experiences of adults should be taken into consideration and how these should be used as a resource in the new learning process.

Implementation and Integration of a Consulting Client Project into an MBA Degree Program

The initial concept of a consulting project was a component of the original pedagogical design of a new MBA degree program that emphasized the work of management guru Dr. Peter Drucker. Applying management theory directly into a real-world setting provided benefits for both graduate students and society as the consulting projects would be *pro bono*. The Director of the Consulting Institute solicits clients from contacts with numerous Chambers of Commerce, personal networking contacts, local businesses, and word-of-mouth from past clients. The potential client is vetted with a personal interview and the goal of the process is to match a particular client's needs with one of the academic courses upcoming within the twelve courses of the MBA program. The requirement of the client is that they must be available to the student team throughout the seven-week term and that at least one representative of the company be available to attend the final team presentation either live or via telecommunication. The client receives a verbal and visual presentation (using PowerPoint) from the four-to-five team members as well as a written report of their research and recommendations. Faculty grade the presentations, the reports and the leadership abilities of the team leader. The client is asked to evaluate the team presentation and value of their product as it applies to their company using a standardized grading rubric for this purpose.

Perceived Value of the Consulting Experience by Students

Quantification of "value" is challenging but first-hand primary data in the form of interviews can serve as valuable qualified feedback for student learning outcome purposes. Below are direct quotes from students who experienced the opportunity to participate in consulting client projects throughout the MBA program. The data is divided into two categories: a convenience sampling of current students and a sampling of recent graduates of the program. Direct quotes are designated as such. In some cases, the interviewee's comments were paraphrased by the interviewer.

Summary of Interviews—Current Students

- “Through the consulting projects, I have learned about how to engage with other types of businesses, and people outside my industry. I learned a lot about research.”
- When asked which element of the program had the greatest value, the student replied: “In a weird way, it has less to do with the subject matter than my having to be inventive in the projects. The consulting things have taken me far afield from what I usually do. I have had to deal with erratic team members. I have learned to embrace uncertainty, I am not fearful of failure. I have had to learn new industries and had to focus on marketing. I have become better at research.” He continued, “I have gotten a broader view of the world; I have learned to read very intensely. I have learned to do research. I have had to think very hard. I have had to build mental muscle. I had to learn social media before I even had a Facebook account.” The main benefit is the consulting work; it stands business education on its head. “It just doesn’t exist anywhere else. You’re doing a full-on sprint for 7 weeks. You are dealing with real-life business persons, who have W-2s to worry about, and they are relying on you.”
- “One of the things I love is that I am learning through my consulting experience. When I graduate I want to be able to show my experience and hope to have a management position one day.”
- One of this student’s favorite elements of the courses is the consulting, in which she learns about other industries than the one in which she is currently employed.
- “The concept of consulting for every class is brilliant. Here is an interesting anecdote: I conducted a call with a client in Northridge. A couple of MBA students were listening to his conversation (he was in a Starbucks) and were amazed that students at our institution were doing these kinds of projects. They were not just impressed, they were flabbergasted.”

Summary of Interviews--Alums

“The most value was not from the course materials. For me, they were a refresher, since my undergrad degree was Bus Ad/Mktg. The best value came from the consulting projects, especially when playing a team leader role. The fact that our projects dealt with “real” people as opposed to case studies mattered.”

[In response to question, “What had the highest value to you in our program?”]: “The leadership skills learned while doing the consulting...I think I apply it every day, now. If I had them before, I wasn’t aware of them. A lot of the clients come in with their own expectations of what their problems are. When we address the problems, they get a new and broader perspective.”

“The consulting was of the most value to me. [This was repeated multiple times throughout the interview.] The experience that I gained helped me.”

“The consulting was key.” She mentioned that every course had a consulting client, ranging from mom-and-pops to big firms, and that she developed her presentation skills, and to be fast on her feet. She pointed out that these were not “mock” exercises; they were “real.” In an interview for a position she subsequently landed with Google, she asked the interviewer, who questioned her credentials, “Does it make sense for me to spend six figures on doing mock exercises, or spend \$20K doing real ones?”

“I had opportunity to lead teams through the projects.”

The consulting projects had great value, but were diminished by a slacker, for whom she and others frequently had to cover.

“The most valuable element of the program was the consulting.”

CONCLUSIONS

Graduate business education in the United States is progressing rapidly from pure lecture classrooms to those that engage students into an active learning environment. While case studies have served as proxies for the “real world” they suffer from uni-dimensionality and predictability as to the topic for each of their respective courses. Replacing cases with real consulting projects with real clients involves a

complex management of the curriculum requiring the selection of appropriate clients, matching the client's needs with the abilities and capabilities of the students at their curriculum mastery level, and obtaining faculty that have not only academic capabilities to teach a course but also consulting experience to serve as a guide and mentor to the students as they progress through the consulting project.

Student perceptions of the value of the consulting project as a graded component of each graduate MBA course provides a uniform and powerful acclaim to the pedagogical value of each project undertaken. Graduates of the program can add to their resumes the names of the twelve consulting clients from which they have actually contributed in a work setting to assist the firm. This distinguishes these graduates from most other MBA programs in the United States and sets them apart with their real-world experiences.

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