PROJECT-BASED ACTION LEARNING IN TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED MBA PROGRAMS: THE OHIO UNIVERSITY MBA WITHOUT BOUNDARIES EXPERIENCE

Ziad Akir, Ohio University, ziad.akir@ohio.edu
Thom Luce, Ohio University, luce@ohio.edu

ABSTRACT

Project-based action learning (PBAL) is investigated to determine its effectiveness in graduate business education. Volunteer students currently enrolled in the Ohio University's MBA Without Boundaries (MBAWB) were interviewed to discuss PBAL and its impact on their skills and career progress. Additional facts were gathered from faculty members and existing literature describing MBAWB format, objectives, and content. The findings were distilled into one overarching theme and several related ones. The overarching theme, "graduate business schools using PBAL have a culture in which flexibility, student-centered, and collaboration drive institutional practice", reflects the pervasive student-centeredness of PBAL. The findings can serve as guideposts to graduate business schools seeking to meet the needs of high potential working individuals.

Keywords: Project-based action learning, business education, MBA, technology-enhanced education

INTRODUCTION

We live at a time when educational systems at all levels are increasingly subject to attack and criticism all around the world. Many watchwords such as *change*, *innovation*, and *adaptation* are repeated again and again in the educational professional arena (6). With the emergence of technology and the availability of huge amounts of resources at one's fingertip, the change in the education practice, particularly at the graduate level, is more eminent than any other time before. Graduate business education is no exception. While business nowadays has a great influence on culture and social values (15), graduate business education has been criticized for emphasizing too much theory and esoteric research which has little to do with the real business world. Furthermore, business graduates were seen as narrow-minded individuals who lack interpersonal and communication skills (8). Many business schools have been trying various innovative approaches to address these issues, to improve business education and develop new ways to bridge the gap between traditional classrooms and the "*world out there*" by exercising more innovative methods and making changes to better meet students' needs. Working professionals who would like to pursue an MBA without losing steady paychecks or missing opportunities at work consider part-time program as a compelling option. According to the International Association of Management Education, better known by its old acronym AACSB, among the 200,000 MBA students in year 2000, 63% were part-time. *Business Week*'s inaugural survey of 214 part-time programs in the Fall of 2000 reported that as many as 22,210 part-time MBA students graduated that year, up 14.5% from 1997 (18). Literature in this area has been focusing on the methods of designing and implementing MBA programs and enabling tools, such as the

Internet, that foster cooperative and active learning (1, 9). Nevertheless, the outcome and effectiveness of such new innovative methods need to be addressed in more depth.

PROJECT-BASED ACTION LEARNING IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

In response to the mounting criticisms of graduate business education, many business schools around the world have been trying various innovative approaches to improve the way they design and deliver business programs. A number of MBA programs utilize techniques, such as project-based team-work (13), case-based study (20), on-line cooperative education (3), and project-based action learning (19). Current literature is sated with example programs that are using some or a combination of these techniques (5, 11, 13).

For graduate business education, particularly executive MBA programs, project-based action learning (PBAL) stands out as a promising and unique technique. Its student-centered philosophy to education is used in many graduate schools around the world (2). PBAL provides a better means to learning for working professionals. Students learn by solving problems rather than by taking traditional courses commonly conducted in traditional classroom-based education and are encouraged to take ownership of problems and processes. In PBAL environment, learning is organized around projects that involve students in design, problem solving, decision making, or investigative activities; it gives students the opportunity to work in groups on projects related to the their working environment relatively independently over extended periods of time, and ends in realistic products or presentations by each group (10). The role of faculty member is to be a facilitator and to design appropriate and realistic cases, which not only will allow students to discover relevant issues for research and investigation but also challenge both the level of understanding and the relevance and completeness of the issues studied (17). Gradually, the students take over the role of a facilitator themselves as they become effective self-directed learners.

One method to assess the effectiveness of PBAL is the gains in student achievement in scores of standardized tests. Other methods include the ability to develop general problem-solving strategies, to measure gains in specific skills taught in the context of projects, and to rely on survey methods and participant self-reporting. An ideal method to assess working executives in MBA programs is to solicit opinions of the participants of what they perceived to be the benefits or effects of PBAL and how such learning technique affects their abilities to function more effectively in a business environment.

PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

This study is a qualitative investigation of project-based action learning in a part-time executive MBA program. We attempted to evaluate the MBA Without Boundaries program (MBAWB), offered by the College of Business at Ohio University, by generally asking the following questions: What are the most significant skills students learn throughout MBAWB program? How effective are the current teaching/learning practices in MBAWB? And how to enhance the delivery mode of MBAWB to better achieve its intended goals?

We designed and conducted the study using practices and concepts advocated in the literature. Several other research questions guided us in this study such as: "Is the adoption of PBAL in part-time graduate business education a suitable approach?" "Is this method good enough to prepare business students for the real business world?" "Does PBAL guarantee the success of the students to become future business and corporate leaders?"

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted on past and current participants of MBA Without Boundaries (MBAWB) program. Qualitative data was collected through interviews, both face-to-face and in the form of electronic mail. The participants are professionals who are enrolled in the program while continue working on their current jobs. The main objective of the interviews was to capture students' perceptions and views regarding the effectiveness and usefulness of project-based action learning approach. Additional discussions with faculty members were combined with the literature that describes MBAWB and its learning objectives, and then compared with the participants' feedback in order to understand the extent of the outcomes.

MBAWB Overview

The College of Business at Ohio University has implemented project-based action learning (PBAL) in its traditional on-campus MBA program for several years (19). The concept was then extended to its MBAWB that was launched in 1997 as a distance offering with the ease of access and learning enhancement of a virtual learning community that leverages the power of electronic collaboration among students and faculty, electronic access of le arning material, and electronic tutoring by faculty. A unique aspect of MBAWB is the utilization of realistic and modern business problems; thus, the participants must have at least 2-4 years of increasingly responsible position. They must be sponsored by their companies and should be able to participate fully in the program without having to stop working or commute regularly.

The program is organized into nine learning units (projects) and requires two years of commitment. There are three one-week on-campus residential meetings, one each at the beginning, middle, and end of the program, and three extended weekend meetings in each of the two years. A typical class calendar is illustrated in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1. **Typical Schedule for a Class in MBAWB**

Program Commencement/Initiate and complete project 1/Initiate project	**Residency Week #1**
Complete project 2/Initiate project 3	Extended Weekend #1
Complete project 3/Initiate project 4	Extended Weekend #2
Complete project 4/Initiate project 5	Extended Weekend #3
Complete project 5/Initiate project 6	**Residency Week #2**
Complete project 6/Initiate project 7	Extended Weekend #4
Complete project 7/Initiate project 8	Extended Weekend #5
Complete project 8/Initiate project 9	Extended Weekend #6
Complete project 9/Program termination	**Residency Week #3**

Each project, with the exception of the first, begins and ends during a residency. The residential meetings are designed to enable the development of interpersonal skills, allow accelerated

project start-up, evaluate project deliverables, and assess student learning. Besides presenting the deliverables of a certain project, participants meet face-to-face with faculty members; participate in workshops; and plays an active role in the initiation of the next project. These activities help them to be more relaxed and engaged in the process. Between residencies, participants do their research, collaborate with other team members, and receive faculty tutoring – all via the OU MBAWB Intranet. Exhibit 2 lists all the projects offered in the program and their context.

Exhibit 2. **List of All Projects and Their Context**

Project 1	Orientation – The business concept
Project 2	Basic business concepts – making and selling and financing activities
Project 3	Developing strategy
Project 4	Global competition & international trade
Project 5	Individual project
Project 6	Financing the firm
Project 7	Entrepreneurial activity – introducing an offering
Project 8	Business and public policy
Project 9	Individual problem

The faculty team designs seven of the nine projects in consultation with an external professional review board. Projects may be changed in the order and emphasis. Two of the projects are individual projects where each student designs and implements projects of personal interest that often benefit his/her company.

Data Analysis

Data in the form of narrative and participant interview transcripts were analyzed and reported using inductive analysis. The interviews focus on two aspects: the skills gained by the student in certain business areas and the mode of delivery and assessment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings were distilled into one overarching theme that "graduate business education must revolve around flexibility, problem-based action learning, collaboration, and integration of work and school." A business program designed for high potential working individuals must combine the robustness of project-based action learning with the power of modern collaboration tools and the personal touch of high intensity residential experiences with the "any time - any place" convenience and ease of access to on-line education enabled by the latest in information and communication technology. It should also allow individuals to study while continue working and to integrate their working experience into their learning. The findings of the interviews with volunteer participants are detailed and briefly analyzed.

Project-Based Learning

Participants felt that the nature of the program presents a positive challenge to them. The program by far deals in real time and the project-based learning develops a student by real experience, not by the book. Many see the program as "real life", there is an outcome and they

are evaluated based on the outcome, not just based on answers to a problem on a final which one may or may not retain.   The participants enjoyed the team-based learning while having faculty be the guide on the side instead of "the sage on the stage". Project-based learning used in the program pushes the students to think differently, maybe even more holistically, while using current technology to solve problems.   The program scope, the learning issues and methods encourage students to build on their weaknesses and out of their comfort zone.   Some participants acknowledged that in learning to develop new skills they have developed an inner confidence that their peers can depend on.

Abilities and Skills

Although this area is subjective in nature, participants generally indicated that the program has greatly improved their leadership, research, analytical/strategic thinking, creative, and technical skills, particularly computers and other technology-based, e.g. computerized spreadsheets and Internet search. Some participants who came to the program without any significant knowledge or skills in information technology felt that mastering information technology prior to joining the program could save them from spending the extra time learning the skill during the project. Others indicated that it would be useful if MBAWB Intranet provides a list of Internet resources to practice with or explore. All participants agreed that their ability to integrate information from a wide variety of sources and skills in financial analysis, business modeling, collaboration & working in teams, working with ambiguity, and selling ideas & marketing have significantly improved.

Structure & Delivery

The overall structure and delivery of MBAWB provides the flexibility to work around student's work and family commitments. Participants felt that the current structure of the program helps them balance work and family responsibilities. The program provides a venue for distance learning as it eliminates the need to commute to campus regularly and allows the students to work on the projects from anywhere, anytime using the latest in information and communication technology. It is obvious that the Internet plays an important role in enhancing collaboration between students and to supplement face-to-face meeting with faculty members (7). Some electronic tools used in MBAWB has initiated some participants to adopt the same or similar tools for their companies. At least two participants implemented *NetMeeting*, an online conferencing tool, for their companies to link people in geographically scattered offices.

There were some reservations, however, regarding the effectiveness of online meetings and communication with the instructor. Several participants interviewed indicated that online communication with instructors is sometimes ineffective and needs to be improved, although others agreed that the instructor's role is minimum because project-based action learning revolves around collaboration, learning by doing, and learning from each other.

Most participants found that their work experience was a major contributor to their success in the program and the collaboration mode provided by MBAWB enables them to share experiences and contribute to each other's learning. They applauded faculty for designing the projects that reflect current issues.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis suggested that problem-based active learning in professional business education generally enhances student analytical, communication, and collaborative skills. In general, participants agreed that MBAWB program greatly contributed to the students' business knowledge and creative skills. However, it is not clear if some business skills that the students have are indeed due to MBAWB, considering that many of the participants are highly experienced and/or have been working for several years (some as many as 15 years). Concerns raised include the need for more instruction in the area of financial management and accounting, extra instruction time and workshops that are driven towards certain projects during residency weeks, and supporting material such as online tutorials and links to useful resources on the subject. In terms of online collaboration and communication, there is a need for more faculty member's feedback and direction during a project. One specific suggestion was to hold a class-wide *NetMeeting* session during the first few projects to ensure everyone is comfortable with the learning mechanisms and goals. As a final point, MBAWB program needs to be marketed more actively and nationally to enhance its reputation in particular and the reputation of the university in general.

This research was conducted for MBAWB program, therefore, caution is warranted in generalizing its results to other MBA programs. Project-based action learning is a proven educational technique, but cultural settings and environments exercised in MBAWB may not necessarily applicable to MBA programs in other cultural settings elsewhere. Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest the potential of PBAL, when used in graduate business education for working professionals, to enhance students' technical and analytical abilities. The use of modern communication tools gives PBAL greater potential and the advantage to work even more successfully.

REFERENCES

1. Arbaugh, J. B. (2000). How Classroom Environment and Student Engagement Affect Learning in Internet-based MBA Courses. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *63*(4), 9-26.
2. Carvalho, G. C., Kirch, D. P. (1996) A Problem-Based MBA Curriculum: the Ohio University experience, *Mid-American Journal of Business*, *11*(2), 9-18.
3. Dellana, S., Collins, W., West, D. (2000). On-Line education in a Management Science Course-Effectiveness and Performance Factors. *Journal of Education for Business*, *75*(5), 43-47.
4. Dick, B. (1997). *Action learning and action research* [Online]. Available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/actlearn.html
5. Duin, A. H. (1998). The culture of distance education: Implementing an online graduate level course in audience analysis. *Technical Communication Quartely*, *7*(4), 365-389.
6. Elsaid, H. H., Schermerhorn, J. R. (1989) The Future of Higher Education for Business and Management, *Mid-American Journal of Business*, *6*(2), 11-18.
7. Girion, J. (2001) E-Learning and the MBA, *eLearning* [online], Available at: http://www.elearningmag.com/issues/june01/onlinemba.asp

8.   Gordon, R. A., Howell, J. E. (1989). *Higher Education for Business*. New Your, NY: Columbia University Press.

9.   Greco, J. (1999). Going the Distance for MBA Candidates. *Journal of Business Strategy*, *20*(3), 30-34.

10. Jones, B., Rasmussen, C., Moffitt, M. (1997). *Real-life problem solving: a collaborative approach to interdisciplinary learning.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

11. Markel, M. (1999). Distance education and the myth of the new pedagogy. *Journal of Business & Technical Communication*, *13*(2), 208-223.

12. McGill, I., Beaty, L. (2001). *Action Learning: A Guide for Professional, Management & Educational Development.* London: Kogan Page Limited.

13. McKendall, M. (2000). Teaching Groups to become Teams. *Journal of Education for Business*, *75*(3), 277-282.

14. Moursund, D. (1999). *Project-based learning using information technology.* Eugen, OR: International Society for Technology in Education.

15. Samuelson, J. (2000). "Business Education for the 21st Century" In *Working for the Common Good: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Management*, edited by P. C. Godfrey and E. T. Grasso, pp. 11-18. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.

16. Sanders, L. (2000). Project-Based Learning: Don't Dictate, Collaborate! *Texas Center for Adult Literacy and Learning Newsletter*, *4*(4) [On Line]. Available at http://www-tcall.tamu.edu/newsletr/sum00/sum00a.htm

17. Savery, J. R., Duffy, T. M. (1995) Problem-Based Learning: an instructional model and its constructivist framework, *Educational Technology*, *35*, 31-39.

18. Schneider, M. (2001) "MBAs for Working Stiffs: Growing demand has schools beefing up part-time programs." *BusinessWeek* [online], Available at: http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/01_13/b3725132.htm

19. Stinson, J. E., Mitler, R. G. (1996) Problem-Based Learning in Business Education: curriculum design and implementation issues*, Ohio University, College of Business* [online], Available at: http://mbawb.cob.ohiou.edu/paper3.html

20. Thompson, E. (2000). Are Teaching Cases Appropriate in a Mainland Chinese Context? Evidence From Beijing MBA Students. *Journal of Education for Business*, *75*(6), 108-112.