THE MBA WITHOUT BOUNDARIES - CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN AN ON-LINE MBA PROGRAM WITH A DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the origin and history of the Ohio University MBA Without Boundaries (MBAWB) program. This program uses a problem-based pedagogy that has evolved over the past fifteen years at Ohio University. The program has no "courses" in the traditional sense but rather uses a series of eleven or more "problems" to frame the desired learning outcomes. The MBAWB is an on-line MBA program that requires nine residential experiences spaced over the two years of the program. The first and middle residencies are one week each, the final residency has been one week but will become two weeks with the next intake and the remaining six residencies each occur over a long weekend.

The paper describes the evolution of problem-based pedagogy at Ohio University, including the development of a full-time, fully problem-based residential MBA in 1992, the original structure of the MBAWB program, comments from students and plans for the future. Changes in the program are viewed as a Continuous Improvement Process, much as AASCSB asks schools of Business to use with all their programs.

Keywords : Problem-based learning, distance-learning, MBA, business education

INTRODUCTION

MBA programs have evolved through a number of significant changes at Ohio University during the last twenty years. Twenty years ago we offered "traditional" classes in traditional, discrete MBA subjects: accounting, finance, marketing, strategy, etc. Dissatisfaction with the "silo" approach to business education and concern with issues raised in the Porter and McKibben report (2) lead John Stinson, Bill Day, and others involved with the full-time MBA program to create an integrated business core in the mid to late 1980s. Students still did most of their work in traditional courses but they also took a special integrated business analysis course (IBA) for three quarters. The IBA sequence used a problem-based learning pedagogy and evolved from Constructivist theories on how students learn (2, 3, 5, 10).

Success with the IBA led to year long development project and the launch of a fully integrated MBA program (one with no traditional courses) in 1992. As described by Stinson and Milter (12) the program consisted of eight major learning projects and a number of smaller problems. Problems were designed to mirror real business situations – they were "ill-structured", they were often ambiguous, they crossed traditional discipline boundaries. They were, in short, similar to the kinds of problems business people deal with every day. There were no textbooks, no prepared cases, just problems, and instructional staff that served as tutors and guides to the learning process and occasionally provided short instructional modules on a just-in-time basis. It is interesting to note that this approach significantly pre-dates the AACSB's statement that "Preparation for the rapid pace of business cannot be obtained from textbooks and cases, many of which are outdated before they are published." (reported by in 7).

Several years experience with a fully problem-based curriculum, coupled with John Stinson's vision of how education must evolve and Ohio University president Robert Glidden's support lead to the development of the Ohio University MBA Without Boundaries program (6, 11).

THE MBA WITHOUT BOUNDARIES (MBAWB)

The MBAWB uses a problem-based pedagogy with most of the functional material presented in the context of real business problems. Most of the problems are "ill-structured" -- they don't have clean, textbook answers (just like real life). The problems normally require that the student work with multiple disciplines at the same time (just like real life). For example, a problem related to starting a new business may have accounting, finance, marketing, operations, MIS, HR, legal, etc. issues -- all of which have to be addressed at the same time. Much of what the student learns is learned on a just-in-time basis, in the context of problems similar to those they will (or have) experienced on the job.

The MBAWB makes extensive use of the Internet for collaboration and study, but it is not a "pure" on-line program. In fact, one of our most distinctive features is the use of "residencies" where students and instructional staff come together for short but intensive periods of time. As originally designed the program had three full week residencies and six weekend (Thursday through Sunday) residencies spread over two years. Major learning problems are typically begun at one residency and completed at the following residency. Residencies are also used for enrichment work, skill building, assessment and other tasks that are best done in a face-to-face environment.

The MBAWB initially used nine major learning projects: Orientation to the business concept (completed during the first full-week residency), Basic business concepts – making and selling and financing activities, Developing strategy, Global competition and international trade, an individual project, entrepreneurial activity – commercializing an invention, improving operations, business and public policy and a final individual project. Project topics were rearranged and evolved over time to include, among other things, a major project on Financing the Firm. With the exception of the two individual projects, all learning projects were team efforts and normally concluded with the production of a major report and/or a presentation. Presentations were often made to members of the business community. For example, portfolio and fund managers for the Financing the Firm project, a panel of business executives with international experience for the Global project, a panel of politicians and lobbyist for the public policy project and entrepreneurs whose ideas had been tested and researched for the entrepreneurial activity project.

Project work was supplemented by various instructional tools including on-line discussions of relevant topics, individual assignments both directly and indirectly related to the main project, synchronous chat sessions, learning modules, including learning objects (8), CD-Roms and even books. Team discussions, project work and most interaction between faculty members and students were coordinated through threaded discussions in Lotus Domino databases. A drop box was provided for closed submissions (typically individual assignment work) and other assignments were posted in team databases. The final activity of each project was a project debrief and each residency terminated with a program debrief. These sessions gave the

participants a chance to reflect on what they had learned and to offer suggestions on how the project or program could be improved in the future.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

As mentioned above, each MBAWB residency ended with a program debrief where participants had the opportunity to voice any concerns they had about the program and offer suggestions on how the program might be improved. In addition to the debrief sessions, each class typically had at least one opportunity to meet with members of the Executive Advisory Board to discuss the program and how it might be improved. Student comments were also gathered by Dale Houser, a member of class five, as part of an individual project related to marketing the MBA and the program has been the subject of exploratory studies by Franklin (4), Akir and Luce (1) and others.

Several common threads emerged from the student feedback and studies. Students typically wanted a little more structure, especially in the beginning of the program. They often felt a need for more guidance or structure in the areas of accounting and finance. A number of students also raised concerns about peers who failed to pull their weight on team projects and how these students were evaluated by the instructional staff.

Many students wanted an international experience as part of the MBAWB program (the full-time program has included a required international consultancy project for a dozen years or more). Some students were also concerned that the final project was an individual project which, after two years of intense team work, seemed anticlimactic.

Faculty members expressed the need for better initial and ongoing assessment of students and better matching of desired program outcomes to projects. Faculty members were also concerned about the workload associated with the program (the original plan used a delivery team of about six faculty members who worked with the program on a non-stop basis for the entire two years of a class).

PROGRAM EVOLUTION

The original intent of the program was to have projects build on one another but there was a tendency to start the program with fairly macro-level projects, projects that sometimes stretched students further than they were ready to reach. For example, most early projects require some background in finance and accounting but the primary project related to these topics was sometimes offered during the second year of the program.

During the 2001-2002 academic year the entire College of Business developed and approved a combined set of outcomes that should be achieved by all MBA programs. The MBAWB development team looked at the existing project sequence and content along with the list of desired outcomes and developed a revised and expanded list of eleven projects. The development team also mapped outcomes to projects to provide guidance on what should be included in each project and the associated learning materials.

 The first project remains an introduction to the learning methodology and basic business concepts. The next three projects focus on core business concepts including accounting, finance,

marketing, operations and building a business case. These are still projects and they still cross disciplinary lines, but they are a bit more focused than some of the earlier projects.

Project four, the operations oriented project, is the first individual project and is aimed at operations or process improvement within the individuals own organization. This project is one of two major "pay back" projects because each student has the opportunity to provide a major return to their own organization for the time and money invested in their participation in the program.

Projects five, seven and eight follow a pattern of "make it", "change and/or expand it" and "fit it into the bigger picture." Project five deals with startup issues, including startup financing. Project seven deals with mergers and acquisitions and change management. Project eight looks at business in the broader environment and includes ethics and social responsibility as well as the technological, political, legal, economic and international environments.

Project six occurs at the midpoint of the program, during the second week long residency. This project allows students to demonstrate that they have learned how to learn and deals with weaknesses discovered during the first year of the program. This is done by channeling students into one of several small projects, depending on their needs.

Project nine is the second big "pay-back" project. This is an individual project that requires the participant to identify a cross-functional need within their organization, get buy-in for the project, do the necessary work and present the findings at the highest level possible within the organization. The project is designed to provide valuable input to the organization while increasing the participant's visibility within the organization.

Project ten culminates the growth cycle begun in projects five, seven and eight by considering the organization's strategic position in the global business environment. Issues related to trade, culture and country analysis are included in this project.

Project eleven is a new, final team project. This project is a two week international consultancy project. Students are placed in companies, often with one or two local students, and work on one or more problems faced by the company. This project is based on many years of experience with Joint Student Consultancy Projects in the Ohio University full-time MBA program and the Global Competitiveness and Global Learning Community programs offered to undergraduate students at Ohio University.

The specialization that occurs on project six is made possible by better tracking of student progress on each project and its associated learning outcomes. Faculty meet individually with each student at the conclusion of each residency and perform something akin to a SWOT analysis on the student's performance. This analysis considers assessment results, peer evaluations and outcomes related to action plans created at the previous residency.

Issues related to faculty work load have been resolved in different ways. First, the College of Business is moving towards "on-load" assignments in the MBAWB. This is a process of moving towards the goal, not a complete solution, because participation on a project team isn't

equivalent to teaching a traditional course and we are still attempting to determine the best way to weight the effort.

We have also changed the composition of the faculty team. The original approach used a team of about six people to deliver the entire program (deliver, but not necessarily develop). We are now using a larger pool of faculty, keeping two or three people as core members of the team and bringing in "specialists" on an as-needed basis. The core faculty helps maintain continuity with the students and have major responsibility for monitoring student development and watching for potential problems.

CONCLUSIONS

The MBAWB is a work in progress and will, hopefully, always remain that way. We believe that the re-sequencing of projects, along with improved learning exercises, will solve many of the structure and guidance problems mentioned earlier.

Better assessment and monitoring of student progress should help reduce, if not eliminate, problems with students who don't pull their weight on team projects. We also included questions related to these issues in our interview screening process to see how applicants might respond to these problems and to sensitize them to our concern.

The revised team composition and staffing procedures will help reduce faculty burn-out (fewer faculty will be involved all the time), and with some of the structure and guidance issues (more direct faculty expertise will be available where needed).

The revised sequence of projects now concludes with two group projects and the final international project provides an opportunity for participants to demonstrate everything they have learned over the course of the program while obtaining first hand experience in international consulting.

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