PROGRAMMATIC EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING IN AN MBA PROGRAM

Douglas E. Wolfe
Eugene T. Byrne
Southern Methodist University

For more than a decade, experience-based learning methods have been introducted into MBA programs across the country. These methods have taken numerous forms: a variety of simulation games and exercises, encounter groups, business clinics, field projects, internships, and various other classroom and independent study projects and experiences. Generally, these efforts to make use of experience-based learning (EBL) methods have been initially experimental and conducted either within the context of an existing course or as a newly-established separate course. Although several such courses may be offered in the same business school, nowhere, to our knowledge, have EBL methods been introduced on a programmatic basis in MBA programs, where students may choose to complete all or most of their degree program through experiential means. They have not generally been seen as broadly viable alternatives to conventional teaching-learning methods on a programmatic basis. This paper reports on the outcomes of such a program being conducted at the School of Business Administration at Southern Methodist University. The program is partly supported by a three-year grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education.

For several years this School has sought to meet the increasingly diverse needs, interests and backgrounds of its students by providing them with as many choices as possible, including limiting the number of required courses and extending the options available in terms of both the range of course content offered and the alternative learning methods employed. As a result, students have been able to choose, not only between different courses, but sometimes between case discussion, the conventional lecture- discussion and EBL methods for a single course.

Beginning in the fall of 1976, a new MBA program option, referred to as the Action Management Program (AMP), was introduced to provide a programmatic option for students in which they could elect to complete all of the requirements for the MBA degree using EBL methods. In particular, the program emphasized the use of business projects out in local area organizations. This program, and the research conducted in conjunction with it, were established to demonstrate and evaluate the viability of EBL methods on a programmatic basis and across a wide range of course content.

SOME BACKGROUND

The authors have been involved in experiential learning methods of a wide variety for more than ten years. Our experiences with these learning processes have led us to several key observations which were important to this project:

1. EBL methods can be highly effective in allowing students to transform information, knowledge, skills and

experiences into comprehensions and competencies.

2. It is important to assess the readiness of the learner for EBL methods. Some students are quickly captivated, motivated, and perform effectively in these learning environments, and others are frustrated by the ambiguities and the requirements for initiative, risk- taking and self-management. If we can identify those students with high probability of success prior to the learning events, we can greatly improve our ability to provide effective learning for a wider range of students.
3. EBL methods can be highly effective as a vehicle for learning basic concepts and skills. Our experience has suggested that, given an introduction to the language of the discipline and the methods of learning from experience, students can learn new material effectively in the EBL mode as well as applying prior knowledge.
4. No special considerations need to be given to faculty or students in this type of program. The program can be designed to function as an equal partner with other pedagogies in the educational processes of the school.

These observations from our prior experience provided some important foundations on which the Action Management Program design was based.

THE AMP DESIGN

The MBA program at Southern Methodist University enrolls about one hundred seventy students and requires three semesters, forty two credit hours and one calendar year for completion. One half the credit hours are met in required courses. The remaining hours are free electives. Qualified students may waive required courses but they do not receive credit. The fall semester is usually composed of fifteen hours of required courses, while the remaining six hours of requirements are completed in the spring semester. The AMP option is designed to meet each requirement of the MBA program and no special curriculum considerations are given to students. The AMP option offers students sponsored projects with local business firms as the major learning vehicle for completing courses and obtaining the MBA degree.

Student Orientation

Due to the special nature of this new option, entering MBA students were sent descriptive material prior to coming to SMU. Students were told that they could complete all their degree requirements by enrolling in courses and working on actual business projects under the guidance and with the help of full time faculty. In the fall semester, all coursework would be based on business projects. In the spring and summer semesters continuation in the experiential mode was optional. These points were stressed again on the initial day of orientation in September.

Student Selection

After the first day of orientation about forty students expressed interest in the experiential option. Each student was interviewed for at least one-half hour to make sure that the

basic ideas and goals of the program were clear. Some standard paper and pencil tests that measured personal characteristics, preferences, attitudes and values had previously been completed by all students. The results of these tests were used in discussing and evaluating the student's readiness for experiential learning. Twenty four students finally selected the AMP option and enrolled in courses.

Preparatory Periods

Since students were accepted from any undergraduate discipline, a preparatory period was provided prior to students beginning work on actual projects. This period lasted about five weeks and was used to give students an extensive overview of each subject area. Examinations were given at the end of this period to determine each student's readiness.

Practice Project

During the preparatory phase, students were able to develop some of the consultative skills necessary for project work by conducting short projects within the school. Student teams selected projects offered by various administrators and, using a form of learning contract, negotiated the specific problem to be solved. Written and oral reports were given at the end of the preparatory period.

Project Solicitation

Faculty had made contact with local business firms and solicited projects for students. These projects were outlined in brief descriptions given to students. Students formed voluntarily into pairs and selected projects that were consistent with their own career interests and that would meet the required learning objectives. Most project teams selected two separate projects to meet the requirements for the five courses.

Project Conduct

Shortly after contacting their project sponsors, the students submitted proposed learning contracts to the faculty. These contracts outlined the nature of the problem, the intended approach, the manner in which the project outcomes would satisfy the course learning objectives, and methods for evaluation. Upon approval and until the end of the fall semester students worked on the projects and did not attend classes.

The Spring and Summer Semesters

Due to the small size of the AMP group and as a result of diverse interests, it was not practical to offer separate sections for AMP students in the spring and summer semesters. Students who wanted projects for credit had to negotiate with faculty who had previously agreed to accept project work in their regular classes or as independent study. All students in the program continued some of their coursework using EBL methods. On the average they completed more than two-thirds of their MBA degree programs in this mode.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Extensive research and evaluation data were collected in conjunction with conducting this experimental program. Pre- and post-program measures were obtained using several standardized and experimental inventories containing attitudinal, preference, personal characteristics and certain general skills measures. Periodic questionnaires were administered to measure certain student experiences during the program. Near the end of the program an industrial-type assessment center was also conducted as a measure of relative potential as a manager. The results from this assessment center, in conjunction with comparative performance in courses as measured by grades, were considered the primary means for evaluating the overall program effectiveness. These results are reported here.

To provide a basis for appropriate comparison, a control group was selected from the approximately 140 MBA students not involved in the AMP option. This group of 21 students were chosen to match the AMP students on several dimensions, including age, sex, marital status, prior work experience, undergraduate major, undergraduate grades, and GMAT scores. In addition the groups were matched according to eight scales selected from the Omnibus Personality Inventory and the Personal Orientation Inventory which had previously been found to indicate readiness for EBL methods. This control group took part in all of the measures obtained throughout the year.

Since students in both the AMP option and the control group were involved in a wide range of different courses and activities during the year, course grades were considered the most reasonable source of performance measures within the MBA program. Table 1 contains a breakdown of grades for both the experimental and control groups which provides a basis for comparison. Note that grades for AMP students are equal to or higher than comparable grades of control group students. Because of the potential for "halo effect" or for variations in standards applied, it is important to look at some particular comparisons. Fall semester grades reflect special sections established for AMP students, but spring and summer grades do not. Most required courses were completed in designated AMP sections for these students, but there were no such sections for the elective courses.

Of particular interest is the comparison of means for the required Integrative Policy Course, which is designed to apply and integrate material from the various subject area required courses.

Clearly, the performance of AMP students is at least equal to that of control group students. Students engaged primarily in EBL modes do not appear to be disadvantaged when they enter advanced courses, as has often been expressed to us by faculty as a concern about experiential learning methods. These re- suits may be at least partially explained by the increased motivation, pro-activeness, and self-responsibility for their own education and development which was observed in the AMP students during the year.

TABLE 1
COURSE PERFORMANCE AS REFLECTED
IN COURSE GRADES

PROGRAM SEGMENT	AMP GROUP	CONTROL GROUP
FALL SEMESTER*	$\bar{X}$ = 3.444	$\bar{X}$ = 3.276
SPRING SEMESTER**	$\bar{X}$ = 3.723	$\bar{X}$ = 3.411
SUMMER SEMESTER**	$\bar{X}$ = 3.613	$\bar{X}$ = 3.578
REQUIRED COURSES*	$\bar{X}$ = 3.468	$\bar{X}$ = 3.287
INTEGRATIVE POLICY COURSE**	$\bar{X}$ = 3.737	$\bar{X}$ = 3.316
ELECTIVE COURSES**	$\bar{X}$ = 3.711	$\bar{X}$ = 3.468
TOTAL	$\bar{X}$ = 3.592	$\bar{X}$ = 3.388

*AMP Sections designated; Control group in Lecture and Case Sections primarily

**No designated AMP sections; both groups choose from same combinations of conventional and EBL courses

These findings are further enforced by the results of the assessment center. This center was designed as a means for measuring managerial potential using methods and materials frequently used by businesses. The procedure for assessing potential as managers involved using several exercises and role-play situations, including an in-basket test, problem-solving analysis and small group discussion exercise. Each student was observed by multiple, skilled assessors, who met to reach agreement on the extent and quality of observed behaviors for each student. AMP and control students were mixed, and the assessors were not aware of which group they belonged to during these observations.

Table 2 shows the twenty dimensions measured in this assessment center and the mean scores for both groups. Note that on all dimensions except one (Financial Analytic Ability), the mean scores for AMP students are higher. On eight dimensions the ratings for AMP students are significantly higher.

TABLE 2
ASSESSMENT CENTER RESULTS--AMP vs CONTROL
SIGNIFICANCE OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS

	AMP GROUP		CONTROL GROUP				
	$\bar{X}$	σ	$\bar{X}$	σ	t	df	p <
Judgment	4.39	.916	4.06	1.298	.949	33	N.S.
Planning and Organization	4.44	1.149	4.00	1.060	1.250	33	N.S.
Problem Analysis	4.58	1.032	4.26	1.300	.804	33	N.S.
Oral Communication	4.81	1.126	3.97	.909	2.402	33	*.025
Oral Presentation	4.50	.924	4.00	.935	1.587	33	N.S.
Written Communication	4.61	1.195	4.24	1.601	.788	33	N.S.
Listening Skill	4.92	1.033	3.65	1.284	3.226	33	*.001
Ability to Learn	4.71	.919	4.00	1.837	1.412	32	N.S.
Management Control	4.28	2.023	4.09	1.740	.157	33	N.S.
Sensitivity	3.97	1.355	3.12	1.039	2.098	33	*.025
Decisiveness	4.39	1.419	4.29	1.759	.174	33	N.S.
Financial Analytic Ability	3.67	1.533	4.26	1.091	.768	33	N.S.
Sales Ability/ Persuasion	4.53	1.311	3.50	1.089	2.507	33	*.01
Flexibility	4.08	1.437	3.21	1.238	1.927	33	*.05
Leadership	4.42	1.115	3.79	1.238	1.561	33	N.S.
Initiative	4.58	1.406	3.76	1.300	1.820	33	*.05
Stress Tolerance	4.73	1.162	4.00	1.511	1.489	28	N.S.
Risk-Taking	3.69	1.195	2.84	1.362	1.865	30	*.05
Organizational Sensitivity	4.42	1.437	3.71	1.531	1.388	33	N.S.
Impact	4.67	1.236	3.74	.970	2.462	33	*.01

Scale: 1-7 where 1=no behavior shown, 4=moderate amount of behavior shown, 7=extraordinary amount of behavior shown.
*Indicates level of significance for one-tailed test

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

These results strongly support the viability of the programmatic use of experience-based learning methods for graduate business education. As we learn more about experiential learning processes and increase our abilities to conduct them effectively, we will be able to improve our capability to meet the diverse needs, backgrounds, and preferences of our individual students. It is equally important for us to increase our abilities to identify these diversities among our students and to meet them with programmatic flexibility. The results of this study suggest that it is incumbent upon curriculum designers to take into account with greater concern the potential for alternative learning methodologies as well as course contents.