

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ACCELERATED HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Accelerated delivery formats have been available in higher education for around 40 years (Marques, 2012). Despite the ongoing debate about the quality and rigor of such programs (i.e., Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Marques, 2012; Wlodkowski, 2003), numerous colleges and universities today offer students an alternative to traditional day classes for degree completion. The reality is that these programs are likely to continue growing and evolving as more and more people pursue undergraduate degrees—an estimated 20.6 million undergraduates were expected to enroll in 2012 (NCES, 2012). This paper shares lessons learned from two human resource management educators who have used experiential learning exercises in accelerated business degree programs at two different colleges. Details about the experiential exercises used in their courses, including topics such as job analysis and interviewing, are discussed. Challenges and success stories about these experiential exercises are presented, and suggestions for adapting these experiential exercises to an online delivery format are presented along with suggestions for adopting experiential exercises in other disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

Accelerated delivery formats have been available in higher education for almost 40 years (Marques, 2012). The definition of the concept has varied over the years depending upon the scholars and the field of study. For example, Imel (2002) noted that accelerated learning in the field of adult education related to accelerated delivery formats focused on meeting the needs of adult learners while accelerated learning in the training and development discipline referred to a multidimensional approach focused collaboratively on the learner. Lee and Horsfall (2010) observed that scholars have defined accelerated learning either in terms of duration or quicker completion (see Anastasi, 2007; Davies, 2006; IPEDS, 2012; Scott, 2003; Wlodkowski, 2003) or as a comprehensive educational approach that is mindful of the time component in course design and execution (see Boyd, 2004; Daniel, 2000; Imel, 2002; Scott, 2003; Swenson, 2003). For the purposes of this paper, we agree with Marques' (2012) assessment: "...

engaging in an accelerated course format requires a paradigm shift for instructors as well as students" (p. 103). Hence, we operationally draw from all of the aforementioned definitions, especially the collaborative focus on the adult learner and the facilitative, multidimensional educational approach.

Despite the ongoing debate regarding the quality of accelerated delivery formats (see Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Marques, 2012; Wlodkowski, 2003) and the mixed results of studies comparing the effectiveness of accelerated or intensive courses and their traditional counterparts (see Davies, 2006), a quick scan of most university websites is likely to identify some type of alternative for students who do not wish to attend traditional day classes in order to complete degree requirements. Imel (2002) described these accelerated programs "...a mainstay of higher education" (p. 28) over a decade ago. Day, evening, weekend, online, and hybrid programs abound in the higher education landscape at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, including many colleges and universities with prestigious and rigorous accreditations such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). In fact, the AACSB accreditation does not prohibit the use of alternative program delivery methods (AACSB.com, 2013) as these alternative delivery formats face the same scrutiny as traditional programs in terms of quality, rigor, faculty qualifications, etc. The reality is that these programs are likely to continue growing and evolving as more and more people pursue undergraduate degrees—an estimated 20.6 million undergraduates will be enrolled in 2012 (NCES, 2012). By 2020, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) projects that over 43 percent of those enrolled in postsecondary education will be at least age 25. Considering that many students in the 18 – 24 age category also have jobs and/or families, a large segment of the student population in 2020 will be adult learners who are likely to continue seeking accelerated delivery formats. Yet, we remain challenged with continuously improving the strategies for success in accelerated and alternative delivery formats. Marques (2012) observed that the ongoing debate has limited the sharing of strategies for success by those engaged in delivering these formats.

The purpose of this paper is to share the lessons learned by two human resource management educators who have taught in accelerated degree programs at two colleges.

Both educators transitioned into higher education after having careers in human resource management, and they place a heavy emphasis on students mastering the course content from both theoretical and applied perspectives regardless of the delivery format. The experiential exercises used in their courses during a collective 10+ years are explained, and positive outcomes, threats to success, and student feedback, are discussed. The educators conclude by offering suggestions for adapting these experiential exercises to other alternative delivery formats as well as general suggestions for adopting experiential learning in other business disciplines. While accelerated programs have been around for decades, the research and discourse on this topic, especially in applied management areas, are still maturing.

ACCELERATED HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT COURSES

While this paper does not include a discussion on the quality or rigor of accelerated human resource management courses, it is noteworthy that research studies on the effectiveness of human resource management taught using an accelerated delivery format are scarce in the literature (see Wlodkowski, Iturralde-Albert, & Mauldin, 2000, for an exception). However, Lee and Horsfall (2010) studied accelerated learning with a sample that included business administration students and several other disciplines. They reported that students responded positively to a six-week format (versus 12 weeks) but that students and educators alike had some concerns including the timing of assessments and feedback. Ho and Polonsky (2009) studied undergraduate marketing students in a summer course (five weeks) and found similar results; the summer students reported that the subject was more interesting and more favorable overall than the traditional students (12 weeks) in the same course. Davies (2006) summarized the results from numerous research studies across several disciplines.

FIRST EDUCATOR'S COURSE BACKGROUND

The first educator taught an accelerated human resource management (HRM) course approximately 18 times in an adult, cohort-based evening program over a period of three years. This program was administered by a small, private, liberal arts college that is also known as one of two schools in the United States that uses intensive scheduling for the traditional academic programs. Thus, there were no traditional semester courses to use for comparison; however, this educator has taught and is currently teaching other business courses during a traditional, semester-long delivery format.

These HRM courses were delivered over a period of six weeks. The cohort of 15 – 25 students met for four hours one evening each week with students being assigned an additional four hours of work per week in which to complete group work. Attendance was required with absences resulting in a prorated loss points for each absence; students who missed more than two class meetings received an automatic failing grade per college policy. This four-credit hour course was required for the

Bachelor of Science in Organizational Management degree as well as the Bachelor of Science in Business Administration degree.

SECOND EDUCATOR'S COURSE BACKGROUND

The second educator currently teaches a four-credit hour HRM course during a five-week, accelerated format at a large, public community college in the southeast. She has been teaching this course for over seven years. The class meets one night per week for four hours and also holds one separate summary session, which typically lasts eight hours and is usually held on a Saturday. Attendance is required for all classes with absences resulting in a drop of one full letter grade. This course is required within the Associates of Arts and Sciences Contemporary Management degree, which is designed for working adults. Typical class size is 25 students. There are no traditional, semester-long versions of this course at this college. This educator also teaches other accelerated format courses as well as online and hybrid courses.

EXPERIENTIAL HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT EXERCISES

Both educators adopted a facilitative approach with their respective HRM courses. Lecture periods are kept deliberately brief to keep the attention of the adult learners but also to maximize time for exercises. Both educators have experimented with the flipped classroom approach (see O'Neil, Kelly, & Bone, 2012) by asking students to watch videos or listen to pre-recorded lectures prior to class time. That approach helps to maximize the opportunities for experiential learning during the face-to-face class time. Engaging experiential assignments and exercises are used throughout the course. This design keeps the class moving and fosters student engagement despite the challenging four hour time block. Table 1 summarizes the assignments and exercises as well as the outcomes or lessons learned. Each exercise is discussed in more detail following the tabular summary.

JOB ANALYSIS

Given the importance of job analysis in the field of HRM, an experiential assignment was developed for students to learn how to conduct a job analysis. This assignment has been used individually and in groups of four to five students. In the individual version, the student could use his or her own position. With the group version, students had to choose a retail or service position that they could observe for one to two hours, and the position could not be their own. After trying both versions in several courses, the group version was deemed more effective. The assignment required the group to plan what methods they would use to analyze the position. Students were told to explain what they were doing to the person they were observing. Once the field portion of the assignment was complete, students were expected to craft a basic job description and job specification for the position they selected. They also had to develop an effective interview

question for the position they observed. Students were told that using external resources was not permissible with either version of the assignment.

One challenge associated with this assignment was the temptation for individual students to use their company's resources when creating the job description and job specification. Perhaps due to time constraints, some students were just going through the motions and used information that was readily available instead of thinking critically themselves. Many student groups conducted their job analysis on restaurant servers, which meant the group was able to enjoy a meal together, to bond and to have a little fun while completing the work.

Some students really enjoy this assignment. Going into the field and actually scrutinizing someone's work for a couple of hours supports the in-class discussion regarding the comprehensive nature of job analysis. This assignment was often rated as one of the three most effective assignments or exercises on supplemental course evaluations in the first educator's course.

IN-CLASS MOCK INTERVIEWS

In order to practice planning an interview, developing legal and appropriate questions, and demonstrating good interviewing skills, students conducted mock interviews in small groups. A fake restaurant server resume was created as most students can relate to restaurant work, and students were asked to plan the interview process. In groups of three or four, the whole class then took turns interviewing, being interviewed, and observing the interaction. Students who were experienced in interviewing already were asked to go

first, which alleviated some anxiety for those with no experience. The observer was instructed to provide feedback on what the interviewer did well and what he or she could improve upon next time.

This is one of those exercises that can get out of hand very easily. Some groups of students may spend 10 minutes interviewing each person while another group only spends two minutes; the timing is hard to police, even in a small group of 25 students. Thus, some groups may finish much earlier or much later than the others. Scheduling a break just after this activity can help those who finish early. Students usually enjoy the activity so much that they will not hurry even with a break around the corner. The instructions and the handouts on this assignment have to be very clear. Most of our students were nervous to be interviewing and about being interviewed, even though it was a fictitious scenario involving familiar people. Extra space to separate the groups would be helpful with this exercise as it is hard to model the ideal interviewing setting when several students in the classroom are carrying on interviews all at the same time.

While students are generally nervous about this exercise, this exercise was frequently cited as one of the top three most effective exercises in the first educator's course. Students who have never interviewed someone else or have never been interviewed feel more prepared. The classroom is a safe environment in which they can practice going through the motions. Seeing other students also reacting nervously and making similar mistakes helps those who are less experienced to gain confidence.

TABLE 1
HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES AND FEEDBACK

Human Resource Management Topic	Exercises	Positive Outcomes	Challenges
HRM Trends HRM Practice	Environmental Scanning and Current Events	Students practice oral and written communication skills while learning how to scan news and identify relevant information.	Students may not choose appropriate events, and they may not communicate relevant high-lights to the class.
HRM Current & Future Trends Real World Practice	Interview a HRM professional	Students have an opportunity to network with and to practice interviewing skills with a HRM professional.	Scheduling the interview and verifying the credentials of the HRM professional can be barriers.
Job Analysis	Individual or Group Assignment	Students objectively analyze an actual job and generate a job description, job specification, and interview questions.	Students try to choose familiar or easy positions to analyze and may be tempted to use organizational resources.
Interviewing Skills	Mock Interview	Students gain practice in conducting an interview as well as being the interview candidate.	Groups will progress at different rates, and some students may finish much quicker. Students may be very nervous.
Performance Appraisal	Performance Appraisal Exercise	Students practice appraising performance and experiencing rating issues.	Requires significant planning by instructor, volunteerism by the students, and a large block of class time.

INTERACTION WITH HRM PROFESSIONALS

Both educators require students to interact with HRM professionals in their courses. An interview assignment is one mechanism used to facilitate this interaction. Individual students as well as small groups of students have been sent out into the community to interview a pre-qualified HRM professional. Students are given a list of required questions related to current issues and trends, and they are asked to develop a short list of their own relevant and appropriate questions. The students formally present their findings to the entire class. Additionally, panels of HRM professionals have been invited to speak to classes, and guest speakers who are subject matter experts have been invited to share with students. The purposes of interacting with HRM professional are for students to network, to practice interviewing skills, to triangulate information covered in the course, and to gain additional insights regarding current and future trends.

The challenges regarding interacting with HRM professionals typically involve either the HRM professional's scheduling conflicts or the students' schedules. Another challenge is verifying the credibility and qualifications of the HRM professionals. All of the professionals selected for these activities had a minimum of a four-year degree and were either current members of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) or were certified by the Human Resource Certification Institute. Students typically try to interview people they know or can access easily, and often times those HRM professionals did not meet the requirements. The local SHRM chapter was a great resource for helping connect students and professionals.

Students frequently cited the interview with a HRM professional as one of the top three most effective assignments in the first educator's course. In most cases, the HRM professionals took great care to answer every question, even those that students were uncomfortable asking in class. Feedback from the HRM professionals was positive as well, and several students were able to use connections made through this experience to secure internships and/or employment.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING/CURRENT EVENTS

Despite the accelerated format, both educators incorporate the use of written summaries of current events or trends in the HRM environment. Students are asked to find, summarize in writing, and informally present news events and/or trends in the HRM environment. The second instructor has asked students to develop the collection of environmental scans into a research summary from which they develop a formal presentation at the end of the course. Written and oral communication skills are emphasized by both educators.

The challenges of this assignment usually involve the students' selecting inappropriate events or trends and/or the students' inability to effectively summarize and present the relevant highlights to the class. Clear instructions, samples, and a rubric outlining the expectations help to overcome most of the problems with this assignment.

Students do not typically enjoy this assignment until they or someone else find an event that really strikes a nerve with them. Relevance and meaning to the adult learner are key, and this assignment is no exception. Otherwise, students may see this assignment as busy work. The educators keep using this assignment, however, because it forces students to scan the environment and to practice their communication skills.

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

In order to help students grasp important performance appraisal concepts, students actually rate the performance of student volunteers acting out a job. Two student volunteers serve food to four designated customers from a snack bar. As long as there are no food allergies, peanut butter sandwiches are usually included for economic reasons as well as snack food such as chips, cookies, nuts, and/or candy. The customers place a verbal order in front of the entire class, the employees perform their work, and their performance is appraised on dimensions such as customer service and cleanliness. This exercise is conducted in two phases. During the first phase, only one student volunteer is shown the performance criteria. So, the other student makes choices relying on his/her common sense and watching what the other student does. Usually there are some cleanliness differences during this phase. Also, the rating form is a very simplistic five-point scale with one being very low and five being very high for the rating criteria. During the second phase, both students are shown a revised performance appraisal form that provides more descriptions for both the criteria and the five-point rating scale. Again, four customers are served, and students rate the performance. All of the ratings for both phases are written on the board, and inevitably rater errors including strictness, leniency, and central tendency emerge. Sometimes biases such as leniency due to pregnancy emerge. The discussion the follows touches upon how the changes in the rating form impacted the accuracy of the reviews from phase one to phase two. Students also discuss how one student employee was unclear about performance standards during phase one. Both phases provide opportunities to discuss the reliability and validity of the performance appraisal form.

This exercise can be challenging to explain to students such that they are not mixed up when phase one is occurring. Good instructions are key to an effective exercise. Planning ahead to have appropriate supplies on hand is also important. Supplies in this example included the food as well as sanitizing wipes, antibacterial hand sanitizer, food-grade gloves, plates, napkins, utensils, and extra tables. For our courses, this exercise works better when there are 20 - 25 students. The number of volunteer student employees should change in proportion to the total number of students in the course.

Students enjoy this exercise. Some of them get carried away when they are the customers; they make odd requests regarding their food and give the student employees a hard time when their service expectations are not met. Sometimes the student employees have a dramatic flair, and they get carried away with acting out their roles. Regardless, when this exercise works as designed, students

are really surprised by the outcomes. Even though we have just discussed halo effects, leniency, central tendency, etc., several students usually rate the employees all threes, all fours, or all fives. Students frequently cited the performance appraisal exercise as one of the top three most effective assignments in the first educator's course.

SUGGESTIONS BASED ON LESSONS LEARNED

Both educators strongly believe that the accelerated HRM course requires editing with each reiteration. Despite having taught the course numerous times, opportunities for improvement still emerge each time. For example, the wording of instructions is a common adjustment. In looking toward the future regarding HRM courses and in trying to assist colleagues in other business disciplines with accelerated delivery formats, suggestions are offered.

HRM IN ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY FORMATS

The second instructor also teaches online and hybrid courses, although not the HRM course. In a hybrid delivery scenario, the same assignments and exercises could be used. However, the ability to facilitate these experiential exercises in an online delivery would be limited but not prohibited. Instead of working with one another, students would have to engage their own community members for these experiences. While the HRM professional interview and the job analysis assignment could easily be transitioned to an online course, other assignments and exercises would have to involve members of the online student's community. Suggestions for transitioning the experiential exercises presented here to exclusively online delivery formats are summarized in Table 2.

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES IN OTHER BUSINESS DISCIPLINES

Our hope is to encourage educators across business disciplines to embrace experiential learning opportunities, regardless of delivery format. While accelerated delivery formats and online delivery formats present some challenges that are different from the traditional semester delivery format, many of the same strategies apply. For example, engaging the professional community is encouraged across delivery formats. Educators are encouraged to ask themselves how they can translate the most important learning outcomes in their courses to experiential exercises for students. The time investment in preparing such exercises and the time sacrificed completing the exercises may result in greater learning than you think is possible.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to share lessons learned from two human resource management educators who have used experiential learning assignments and exercises in accelerated delivery formats for over 10+ years at two different colleges. Specific details about the assignments and exercises themselves were discussed, including the challenges encountered and the student feedback. Human resource management topics including job analysis, interacting with HRM professionals, interviewing, environmental scanning and performance appraisal were discussed. Suggestions for those teaching HRM in accelerated and online formats were provided as well as general suggestions for educators in other business disciplines who would like to try experiential learning. Business educators should not be threatened by the idea of accelerated or alternative delivery formats. Likewise, we must not shy away from using experiential learning in accelerated delivery formats.

**TABLE 2
SUGGESTIONS FOR ONLINE DELIVERY FORMATS**

Human Resource Management Topic	Exercises	Suggestions for Transitioning Online
Job Analysis	Individual or Group Assignment	Easily transitioned to online delivery as an individual assignment.
HRM Current & Future Trends Real World Practice	Interview a HRM professional	Easily transitioned to online delivery. Formal presentation could be videoed.
HRM Trends HRM Environment	Environmental Scanning and Current Events	Easily transitioned to online delivery as designed.
Interviewing Skills	Mock Interview	Students could record themselves interviewing and being interviewed by someone else. Students could also use technology such as Skype to interview one another.
Performance Appraisal	Performance Appraisal Exercise	A video of performance could be assigned to the class for appraisal. The in-class discussion and debriefing could be conducted online.

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