Effects of Action Learning Strategies and Reflection in Teaching Business Research Methods in Business and Management Education

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Abstract: In a rapidly changing business world, Research Methods (RM) and their application to real-world problems are becoming skills that equip students for the rest of their lives. Thus, there are ongoing debates about several practical and pedagogical challenges to teaching research methods. One of the questions to address challenges is how to make RM interesting to Business and Management (B&M) students. Addressing this issue becomes even more debatable for the large class seatings in an increasingly internationalised context. Arguably, to remain relevant, Management Education (ME) must reflect the realities that influence its subject matter, while at the same time addressing social needs and expectations. Therefore, introducing innovative and inclusive methods for learning, teaching and assessment is becoming undoubtedly important for shaping the future of ME. This article presents a reflective analysis of introduced innovative learning, teaching and assessment methods for teaching RM on one of the largest PG taught courses in one of the UK's higher education institutions. In this course, students learn and develop a research proposal for the final PG project. The innovative methods employed in this course were to address the above-mentioned challenge, making RM more interesting for B&M students by improving an engagement. This was achieved by incorporating an active and action learning strategies in flipped classroom settings. The idea was to create an interactive environment where students could master technical information through Learning Set Conversation (LSC), Reflection, and Critical Analysis. Having, LSC about the Case Study, which was linked to research process, helped students to adopt multicultural environment and have a great experience while they were learning and developing their Research Proposal. In addition, introducing the weekly Reflective Work/Reflective Diaries submission as a form of assessment, helped students to keep Reflective Diaries, which allowed them to observe their own research practice and the lessons they have learnt. Effectiveness of the introduced methods and recommendations are based on the Mid-module feedback data which was taken form 3 different intakes between 2021-2023.

Keywords: Business education, Management education, Action & active learning, Innovation in teaching research methods, Reflective diaries in research

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the contemporary transitions in the business world are triggering new trends for ME. To stay relevant, ME must reflect the realities that shape the business world and meet the requirements and expectations of the corporate world and society (Arain and Tipu, 2019). Thus Postgraduate (PG) courses need to be transformational in nature, with its core values focusing on research, collaboration with the industry, and have an international perspective. Wilson (2015) argues that the challenge for Business Schools is to offer a balanced education encouraging students to research and address real live issue to contribute to their companies, their communities, and their countries. Teaching of RM is therefore central to preparing B&M students to meet this challenge. However, teaching RM is complicated because students often come from a wide range of disciplines, with different prior knowledge, diverse interests, and expectations, as such, employing a pedagogical approach that appeals to all students is difficult to achieve. Thus, there are ongoing debates (Earley, 2014, Rich, 2014, Rich et al, 2019, Saeed et al, 2020) about several practical and pedagogical challenges to teaching RM. One of the questions to address challenges is how to make RM interesting to B&M students. Addressing this issue becomes even more debatable for the large class seatings in an increasingly internationalised context. One way to support students in research is to engage them in research-related tasks in research method courses. Such tasks play an important role in developing students' learning of and interests in conducting research (Healey and Jenkins, 2009, Lundahl, 2008, Vandiver and Walsh, 2010).

This article presents a reflective analysis of introduced innovative teaching, learning and assessment methods for teaching RM on one of the largest PG taught courses in one of the UK's higher education institutions. The discussion is based on the author's personal reflection and experience, mainly in the context of postgraduate B&M degrees, within which students are required to carry out a single substantial piece of individual research in their final year. In this course, students learn and develop a research proposal for the final B&M PG project. The innovative methods employed in this course were to address the above-mentioned challenge, making RM more interesting for B&M students by improving an engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Current B&M PG Courses' Landscape in UK

Challenging issues in teaching RM

The master's degrees that broadly can be organised into three categories - 'research', 'specialised/advanced study' and 'professional/practice', is one of the most well-known and well-established postgraduate qualifications in UK higher education (QAA, 2023). Although there are a wide variety of master's degrees on offer all conform to a common threshold standard, which is set out in the Qualifications Frameworks (QAA, 2023). Teaching, learning, and assessment methods used in master's degrees are diverse and vary significantly depending upon the overall aims of a particular course (QAA, 2023). The teaching of RM is a part of the curriculum in most of those courses as most master's degrees include a research project, leading to the production of a dissertation. However, Saeed et al, (2020) observed that many postgraduates joining master programmes do not have sufficient experience in writing a sound research proposal though they join RM courses as compulsory courses at universities. B&M postgraduates are challenged by selecting their research topics, formulating their research aim, objectives, and potential research questions, writing the literature review, and selecting appropriate research design for their proposals and final projects (Wang and Li, 2008; Nielsen, 2016; Saeed et al, 2020). Earley (2014) also found that majority of students joining RM courses are often found anxious, rigid to the courses and hold negative attitudes towards RM learning. Similarly, Howard and Brady (2015) reported about students' concern and their inability to understand difficult and abstract concepts related to RM. These issues and challenges are becoming more an intimidating task for international postgraduates with insufficient experience in academic writing in English (Wang and Yang, 2012).

It must acknowledge that according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) UK, (HESA, 2023), while EU and domestic enrolment numbers saw a decrease in 2021/22, non-EU first year enrolments rose by 32% in HE. This increase was driven by a large increase in the number of first year students from non-EU countries enrolling onto postgraduate taught courses. B&M is one of the most popular degree choices among these postgraduate taught courses. Thus, all these issues challenge instructors how to make these courses interesting for those students, how effectively teach them, how to accommodate the diverse educational needs of students and how to articulate their knowledge of the content of the course (Barraket 2005, Nind and Lewthwaite 2018b).

2.2 Active Learning and Teaching Strategies for RM

While developing the research project that is a key component of most B&M degrees requires critical thinking, which is an important skill for B&M graduates, employers and business organisations also have increased their voice in their demands for B&M graduates to have critical thinking skills. Thus B&M research, and the way in which RM are taught and practiced will continue to make a key contribution and play a significant role in the partnership between academia and practice (Rich, 2014).

Many scholars (Earley, 2014, Engbers, 2016, Ellis and Goodyear 2016; Roman and Uttamchandani 2018, Rich et al., 2019, Saeed et al., 2020) suggest incorporating active learning strategies and real-world assignments in RM teaching rather than accumulating knowledge as it is often done in traditional courses. Active learning refers to student-centred approach that emphasises learners' engagement in active and meaningful construction of their learning (Yao and Collins 2018). The key idea behind active learning and student engagement is reflecting on the experience of learning by doing (Chickering and Gamson 1987; Gibbs 1998; Healey, et. al.,2010). Active engagement in learning may take different forms: flipped classrooms, internship, group discussions collaborative assignments and project, problem solving approach, case study, business simulations, subject-based research, and inquiry etc. All these tasks and activities are intended to engage students actively and deeply in learning about research.

Healey and Jenkins (2009. Pg. 6) proposed four principal ways of conceptualizing the research–teaching relationship in higher education: research-led teaching, where students "learn about research in their discipline"; research-tutored teaching, where students engage in research discussion; research-oriented teaching, where students develop research skills and techniques; and research-based teaching, where students undertake research and inquiry. Authors believe all four ways of engaging students with research and inquiry are valid and valuable, and curricula should contain elements of all of them. This is useful because it gives opportunity to instructors to talk about the different ways in which they may introduce their students to research and inquiry.

2.3 Action Learning and Teaching Strategies for MR

Action Learning (AL), originally introduced by Professor Reg Revans (1980,1982), has long been recognised as one of the most effective approaches for delivering ME. Action Learning in its simplest form is understood to be an experience-based approach. According to Revans (2011) Action Learning necessarily occurs in a closed group or 'set' and, while individuals in the set may each have their own unique problem to work on, learning occurs via the interaction between members of the set. That is the main differentiation to compare this approach with active learning approaches. Thus, Action Learning could be defined as a process that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organisation. It is particularly effective for solving complex problems that may appear unsolvable. Elements of AL has been actively discussed in application of RM. Rich et al., (2019) suggest that recent discussion in higher education has focused on providing personal learning and explore a Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach to the teaching and application of RM. PBL is a student-centred method of learning in which students learn by doing. Students are presented with a real-life problem similar to those they will face in their work. They spend most of the course sessions working in small discussion groups addressing the given case questions. The key differentiator from other forms of active-based learning is the nature of the problem. This is chosen or designed to be complex. The student discussion groups, need to make up their minds about how they would manage it and what actions they would recommend.

3. Case Study

The present study used a qualitative evaluative case study with elements of reflective analyses. A case study evaluation approach is a great way to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular issue or situation. This type of approach allows the instructor to observe, analyse, and assess the effects of a particular situation on individuals or groups (Keen and Packwood, 1995). As an evaluative case study, this case focuses on a particular case of teaching and learning practices in a RM module on the B&M master's taught course.

3.1 The Study Setting and Participants

The study was carried out in one of the largest B&M master's taught courses in one of the UK's higher education institutions. The course has very complex structure with three different (one year, sandwich and advanced research) routes and multiple intakes (September and January) with approximately 2000 students for per academic year. Majority of students on the course are international students with diverse educational background. In this B&M master's course students are required to join several compulsory modules, one of which is Business Research Methods (BRM), which aims to enable students to: (1) understand relevant methodological concepts and challenges associated with business research, (2) identify relevant literature, providing critical analysis of the theories, (3) formulate an appropriate ethical research strategy to plan the gathering and analysis of appropriate data (4) formulate a research proposal on a particular topic of students' interest. In this module students are evaluated through continuous assessments which are decided by the module leader.

The module was taught by the module leader and tutors (between seven to twelve depending on intake) in approximately fifteen separate groups (depending on intake) during the first semester for each intake between 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 years. Approximate number of students for each group was between 50-60. The syllabus, course materials and tasks for assessment was same to all groups. All module related materials (PowerPoint slides, books, book chapters, case study, short videos, journal articles and assignment briefs) were uploaded and posted in the module's Canvas site.

3.2 Innovation on The Module and Reflection Analyses

The innovative methods employed in this module were to address the above-mentioned challenge, making RM more interesting for B&M students by improving an engagement. While managing large courses and modules, it emerged from the module leaders' practice who is the author of this paper, that engagement is driven through interaction and participation. Best way to remain students engaged, especially in an internationalised setting is to keep session interactive. This was achieved by incorporating active and action learning strategies in flipped classroom settings. Flipped classroom settings consistent with research-informed/led practice were deployed and flanked by a LSC and Reflection to ensure that different students' learning needs and preferences are met, regardless of their learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds.

The idea was to create an interactive environment where students could master technical and theoretical information through LSC, reflection, and critical analysis. The module delivery structure included: (1)

Preparation stage: Pre-class self-study, (2) 1 hour face to face Lecture, (3) 1 hour face to face tutorial and (4) Strech/Post-class self-study. A new innovative assessment, the Weekly Reflective Work/ Reflective Diaries submission, which was based on the LSC discussion, during the tutorials, was introduced on the module since the module leader took the module leadership from previous module leaders. Using the LSC during the tutorials and Reflective Diaries (RD) for the weekly submissions, encouraged students to share their experiences - good and bad - and reflect together to draw out the learning. The learning came not only from lecturer/tutors bringing new information or insight (which normally is done during the lecture), but from the members of the LSC sharing their experiences and reflecting on it. Having, LSC about the case study, which was linked to the week's topic/research process, helped students to adopt multicultural environment and have a great experience as an international student. In addition, introducing the Weekly Reflective Work/Reflective Diaries submission as a form of assessment, helped students to keep RD, which allowed them to observe their own research practice and the lessons they have learnt.

3.3 Data Collection and Ethical Consideration

Effectiveness of the introduced methods and recommendations are based on Mid-module feedback which was taken from 3 different intakes between 2021-2023. As this study was taken purely for the pedagogical reasons and is not conceived as pure research at this stage study didn't go through the ethical approval.

According to Universities policy "Protocol for Reflective Practitioner Work by Academic Staff" - The intention of a tutor who reflects on the curriculum, how it operates, how it matches the students' needs and expectations and the requirements of external bodies and so on, is simply to update and/or improve the curriculum in the interests of doing what the University is charged to do: providing a curriculum that is current and comparable to that offered at other institutions. This is normal professional practice and is undertaken with purely pedagogical concerns in mind. The tutor has no research agenda in mind at the time and it is important that this professional updating should proceed without any tutor thinking that it should be inhibited by ethical considerations. Assuming that what happens to the students as a result of the changes continues to be ethical in a broad sense, there is no need to apply for ethical approval for them. The distinction to be made is that that the changes were made by the tutor in the interest of improving the module and the student experience and not in the interest of carrying out a piece of research. (UPR RE01, 2021). In addition, Mid -module feedback on the module was collected anonymously online settings (via Padlet) without confirming any personal data. Questions, or any other aspect of the procedure, didn't intrude on the student's privacy, or risk upsetting or disturbing the students in any way. Innovative approach discussed above is reported at both informal and formal discussions and conferences both within and outside the university (UPR RE01, 2021).

Students were asked three questions as follow:

1. What is working well on the module (e.g. structure, module team, delivery, assessments)?
2. What could be improved (e.g. structure, module team, delivery, assessments)?
3. How module helps them to develop their research proposal?

3.4 Findings and Discussions

Majority of students reported that the BRM module had effective structure. Having flipped class settings helped students to access the module content including recorded lectures outside of face-to-face class time (during "*Preparation*" stage pre-class self-study and "*Strech*" post-class self-study). As a result, students could review case studies and other course materials in advance to tutorial then have class sessions for working together on the assignments.

The LSC during the tutorials also was acknowledged to be effective way of delivering BRM module. Having LSC during the tutorials as part of weekly assessment helped to improve an engagement and an interaction on the module. In addition, as some of the students indicated it helped them to build an interest in RM.

S1[2021 Sem A intake]: Having LSC in class and being more interactive has helped me build interest in BRM. This is the first time I have taken this course. So, I don't know how to do research and I was very sceptical about it.

S2[2022 Sem B Intake]: The tutorial sessions, LSC, have been very great it is helped me understand BRM to a very large extent, weekly reflection has helped me to develop ability of critical thinking about the case study have discussed and studied.

S3[2022 Sem A Intake]: Having this type of BRM lesson makes me very happy. It provided me with many answers to my problems, greatly aided in the advancement of my profession, and increased my understanding and comprehension of business research.

S4[2023 Sem B intake]: It is very interesting to have LSC about the case studies in tutorials. It helps to gain knowledge regarding the final project and assignments. The case studies discussions with other classmates helps to gain a lot of knowledge. Enjoying the module.

S5[2023 Sem A intake]: I was pretty scared in the first few weeks on how I can work on my research proposal. But as each week progressed, the lectures and tutorials made me feel confident that I can submit a good proposal. I like how the BRM module is designed to help the student understand research methods in a step by step manner.

Positive feedback was also about the RD submission from all cohorts. The research process is usually presented as a sequence of between seven and ten distinct stages all of which must be completed for any piece of research to be credible (Saunders et al, 2019). It is easy to get lost in necessary details, required to successfully carry out the individual steps. By taking each step separately, and design weekly units/topics and lectures based on Business Research Methods textbook (Saunders et al, 2019), weekly LSC and Reflective Work/ Reflective Diaries submission tend to support this outcome. Having RD helped students to iterate between these steps, perhaps revisiting various stages many times, as their understanding of the research problem develops and changes as a result of the findings from other steps such as literature review and research design.

S6 [2021 Sem A intake]: BRM Tutorial was very interesting and weekly reflection report helped to think critically and how apply theory to research.

S7 [2022 Sem B Intake]: weekly reflection in the module was a great idea as it helps to remember what we learnt in the lecture and tutorial.

S8 [2022 Sem A Intake]: Sessions are really good and I am able to catch what tutors are teaching in class. By the weekly reflection assignments, we could learn more deeply about the subject and it helps me to prepare a basement for my final research.

S9 [2023 Sem B intake]: This module has been helpful in many ways as a post graduate student. It helped to get back to studies as many of us were joining after a break from studies. The weekly reflection helped to get back to writing to and develop research proposal.

S10 [2023 Sem A intake]: Excellent. The Module has been helpful in giving us a clear understanding about research methods and all the processes involved in conducting a research. Weekly submissions helped us to develop our research proposal step by step.

On top of the benefits discussed above It must be acknowledged that, after implementing new innovative assessment methods for the module according to the Module Evaluation Form (MEF)s, overall failure rate on the module dropped nearly 70% and attendance and engagement improved dramatically. In addition, presented methods helped to decrease the number of the plagiarism cases which is another ongoing problem in HE. Evidence presented in this paper, which is only very small part of large data, indicates that integrating action and active learning strategies in BMR module was effective strategy which improved overall modules performance and students' perception about the RM.

4. Conclusion

The innovative methods discussed in this paper were employed to address an ongoing challenge, making RM more interesting for B&M students. The discussion is based on the author's personal reflection and experience, delivering RM module on one of the largest PG taught courses in one of the UK's higher education institutions.

Effectiveness of the introduced methods and recommendations are based on the Mid-module feedback data which was taken form 3 different intakes between 2021-2023.

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