Making Teaching and Learning a Collaborative Process by Adopting Research Informed Teaching on Executive Education Programmes

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Abstract: In a current, fast changing digital environment, the fact how fast business market is changing and how society's perceptions evolve to become more inclusive and diverse in terms of viewpoint, and overall workforce composition is a strong indication that the education system also requires a change. To remain relevant, business and management education must reflect the realities that influence its subject matter, while at the same time addressing societal needs and expectations. Especially on the Executive Education (EE) programmes, which are driven by changes in technology, the marketplace, and the demand of individual organisation for organisation change, business schools are expected to do more than simply disseminate knowledge. Having learners or clients who are coming from a diverse range of background, who are bringing a variety of learning styles, abilities, and rich learning experience is a challenge to satisfy all stakeholders. Thus, in those programmes where we are trying to bring academic rigour and real-world experience to scale up businesses and help them growth, some innovative and inclusive ways of teaching, learning and assessment are very important to ensure learners' personal and professional development and to demonstrate a real-world impact for those involved. This article presents a reflective analysis of introduced innovative learning, teaching, and assessment methods for one of EE programmes in one of the UK's higher education institutions. The innovative methods employed in this course were to address the above-mentioned challenge, to demonstrate a real-world impact for those involved, in addition to ensuring learners' personal and professional development by making teaching and learning a collaborative process. This was achieved by incorporating an active and action learning strategies in flipped classroom settings. More specifically this was achieved by introducing all elements (research led/tutored teaching, research oriented or research based) of research informed teaching, which focused on real-life problems that client companies are or were facing instead of traditional case study approach. Effectiveness of this approach was acknowledged by both colleagues, who were involved in teaching and supervisory activities and learners. Colleagues reported that learners seemed to be more enthusiastic and attentive in classes after introducing this practice. On the other hand, learners indicated that having an opportunity to work with or supervised by research active staff encourage them to conduct their own research with high quality manner. In addition, it has been observed that this practice also worked well in supervisor-learner engagement and engagement with the material especially in the flipped classroom settings. Effectiveness of the introduced methods and recommendations are based on learners' feedback and the secondary data that demonstrates the impact for the client organisation. 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 ethics approval, which is an acknowledged limitation of this study, however there is an intention for farther developing this limitation to strengthen the research findings and recommendations.

Keywords: Business and management education, Executive education, Action and active learning, Research informed teaching

1. Introduction

In a current, fast changing digital environment, the fact how fast business market is changing and how society's perceptions evolve to become more inclusive and diverse in terms of viewpoint, and overall workforce composition, is a strong indication that the education system also requires a change. It has been suggested (Carrington Crisp, 2024) that 375 million workers may need to switch occupations and consequently, need to learn new skills or advance their qualifications. To remain relevant, business and management education must reflect the realities that influence its subject matter, while at the same time addressing societal needs and expectations. Lockhart (2013) suggests that a successful business school must serve two communities: the research community and the business community. Although there is a significant increase of business education over the last few years, it has been argued (Cuplin and Scott, 2011; Lockhart, 2013) that business schools are too theoretical and not sufficiently address the real-world business challenges that corporates face. Thus, EE programmes both non-Degree courses and Executive MBA/MSc programmes believed to be a critical strategy among the traditional MBA for many business schools. However, it must be acknowledged that although EE courses and MBA programmes are two recognised pathways in business and management education, they serve to different career objectives and professional needs. Therefore, understanding these differences is critical for potential students to make informed decisions on which pathway to take (Murray, 2024).

On the EE programmes, which are driven by changes in technology, the marketplace, and the demands of individual organisations for organisation change, business schools are expected to do more than simply

disseminate knowledge. Having learners or clients who are coming from a diverse range of background, who are bringing a variety of learning styles, abilities, and rich learning experience, Pfeffer and Fong (2004) believe that education should focus

more on learning process, how to learn rather than being content driven to satisfy all stakeholders. Thus, in those programmes where we are trying to bring academic rigour and real-world experience to scale up businesses and help them growth, some innovative and inclusive ways of teaching, learning and assessment are very important to ensure learners' personal and professional development and to demonstrate a real-world impact for those involved.

This article presents a reflective analysis of introduced innovative learning, teaching, and assessment methods for one of EE programmes (Executive MSc in Strategic Management) in one of the UK's higher education institutions. The innovative methods employed in this course were to address the above-mentioned challenge, to demonstrate a real-world impact for those involved, in addition to ensuring learners' personal and professional development by making teaching and learning a collaborative process. This was achieved by incorporating an active and action learning strategies in flipped classroom settings. More specifically this was achieved by introducing all elements (research led/tutored teaching, research oriented or research based) of research informed teaching, which focused on real-life problems that client companies are or were facing instead of traditional case study approach.

Effectiveness of the introduced methods and recommendations are based on learners' feedback and the secondary data that demonstrates the impact for the client organisation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Background of EE landscape

Very early definition of EE introduced by Ballou et al 1999, (p. 340) states that EE is a "*management education for people who are in executive roles or who hope to be*" in such roles. An implication of this definition is that the focus on EE is the executive's development and importantly the impact that can make on business performance. According to Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997) management learning should include both professional practice and theoretical enquiry. Thus, an underlying assumption of effective EE providers should be to develop executives, who are expected to be better equipped to develop, contribute to, and lead initiatives that enhance the performance of their current or future organisations (Lockhart, 2013). Suggested by Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997) curriculum design on EE programmes should focus on developing the critically reflective practitioner. Critically reflective practice is where the practitioner is consciously operating out of a best available working theory but is willing to critique it and is aware of and open to other perspectives. Thus, the curriculum also should include several tools: reflexive and reflective conversations (Cunliffe, 2016) and a dedicated learning journal (Lockhart and Franklin, 2008).

Introduction of the case study method by the Harvard Business School beginning of the 20th century as a novel pedagogical approach, which was marked as a significant shift from purely theoretical to more applied forms of learning, reinforced further development of EE. The case study method involves students learning through real-world business problems, fostering a practical understanding of business management and decision-making (Cuplin and Scott, 2014). Thus, using this method, on EE programmes aimed to provide an immersive learning experience that bridged theoretical knowledge with practical business skills (Lockhart, 2013). According to Harvard business School, EE refers to an immersive learning experience empowering senior executives to reflect, recharge, and improve their performance in their organizations (Harvard Business School, 2016). Thus, currently EE has become a vital tool for leaders aiming to navigate complex challenges and drive innovation.

To keep up with the fast-changing environment of the business and to be successful on the higher education market, collaboration with the businesses and engagement with practice should be in every Business school's DN. It has been argued (Arai et al.,2019) that the process by which teaching is conducted on EE programmes is also critical for its success. Thus, going beyond the case study method and introducing more innovative and exclusive methods for teaching and learning on these programmes are critical. Advancement in digital technology and globalisation making EE more accessible and flexible. Blended (BL) learning models, combining online and in-person sessions, became popular, accommodating executives' busy schedules and extending programs' global reach. Graham (2006) highlights that BL offers more flexibility and improves the teaching and learning process, providing more opportunities for feedback and reflection. In addition, incorporating an active and action learning and teaching strategies are becoming very popular on those programmes.

2.2 Active Learning and Teaching Strategies for EE

Currently, debates about EE suggest (Earley, 2014, Ellis and Goodyear 2016; Roman and Uttamchandani 2018, Rich et al., 2019, Saeed et al., 2020) to incorporate active learning strategies and real-world assignments in EE teaching and learning process rather than accumulating knowledge as it is often done in traditional courses. Active learning refers to learners-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 learners actively and deeply in learning about business and management issue.

2.3 Research-Based and Research-Informed Curricula for EE

Suggested by Healey and Jenkins (2009, pg. 3) learners in all higher education institutions should experience learning through and about research and inquiry. Thus, authors propose a fundamental conceptual shift from the notion of learners as a passive audience for the research output of individual academics to the idea of learners as active stakeholders in a research community. This has been supported by different authors (Levy 2011; Levy and Petrulis 2012; Spronken-Smith and Walker 2010) who are also recommending integrating various forms of research informed/based learning in the mainstream curriculum for all learners, where learners learn through some form of inquiry, or research-based, or problem-based learning.

Healey and Jenkins (2009. Pg. 6) proposed four principal ways of conceptualising 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, thus 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.

There is no doubt that recent discussion in higher education has focused on providing personal learning and explore a Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach to the teaching (Rich et al., 2019). 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.

Currently teaching research methods is a part of the curriculum in most of EMSc/EMBA include a research project, leading to the production of a dissertation. However, Saeed et al, (2020) observed that many executives joining the programmes do not have sufficient experience in writing a sound research proposal or have appropriate research skills. Learners 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). Based on the discussion above the potential of curricula which require learners to construct their understanding of complex knowledge actively (Healey and Jenkins, 2012) assumed to be favourable for EE programmes.

3. Case Study

The present study used a qualitative evaluative case study with elements of reflective analyses. 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). The case introduced below focuses on a particular case of introducing all elements (research led/tutored teaching, research oriented or research based) of research informed teaching, which focused on real-life problems that client companies are or were facing instead of traditional case study approach.

3.1 The Study Setting and Participants

The study was carried out in one of the EMSc courses in one of the UK's higher education institutions. This was a one-year program, as normal MBA, but was targeting business executives with five years or more experience. Majority of learners on the course had senior management responsibility and were from local clients such as: NHS, Local Council, and Police services with diverse educational and business and management background.

On this EMSc course learners were required to join several compulsory modules, one of which was Work Based Integrated Project (WBIP) which aimed to enable each participant to: work independently on a topic of direct relevance to their own career, while developing the analytical skills to locate, critically evaluate, present and analyse relevant theories and data to support integrated work-based project's conclusions and recommendations. The module had an integrated component, Applied Research Skill module which carried 15 credits on its own. Successful completion of the research proposal was a prerequisite for progressing to the delivery of the IWBP.

In this module students were evaluated through continuous assessments which included:

- **Completion of a Client Information Form (CIF):** The CIF provided an outline of issue that clint organisation was faced and confirmed employer support arrangements. This was used to identify an appropriate supervisor who would support learner through the IWBP, including the development of research proposal and obtaining the ethics approval by the university's ethics committee. The IWBP is a piece of management research and therefore it was mandatory to have an ethics approval prior to commencing data collection.
- **Production of a Research Proposal**: The research proposal was assessed by the module leader and carried 15 credits. Successful completion of the research proposal was a prerequisite for progressing to the delivery of the IWBP.
- **The final IWBP Repot/dissertation:** Which included background of a client's problem/issue, critical evaluation of appropriate literature and research methods, presenting and analysing findings, drawing conclusions, and reflecting on personal learning.
- **The Client Report:** Which included a reflection on the implementation of the project.

The module was taught and guided by the module leader (who is the author of this paper) and was supported by project supervisors. 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 on the module's Canvas site.

Dedicated workshops/guidance sessions were held during the IWBP process to ensure continuous progress and provide timely feedback. In addition, the work on the project was supervised in a flexible manner as appropriate to the business under consideration.

3.2 Innovative Methods on the Module and Reflective Analyses

The innovative methods employed on this module by the module leader were to address the above-mentioned challenge, to demonstrate a real-world impact for those involved in project, in addition to ensuring learners' personal and professional development by making teaching and learning a collaborative process. This was achieved by incorporating an active and action learning strategies in flipped classroom settings. Flipped classroom settings consistent with research-informed/led, research tutored, and research-oriented practices were deployed and flanked by reflection and critical analyses to ensure that different learners' learning needs and preferences were met, regardless of their learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds.

The idea was to create an interactive environment where learners could master technical and theoretical information through research inquiry, reflection, and critical analysis. The module delivery structure included:

1) Preparation stage: Pre-class self-study (Research-led teaching, where students "learn about research in their discipline")**.**

Up to date research materials about Strategy and Leadership were available on the module Canvas. In addition, learners could find relevant reading materials and short videos on the module Canvas.

2) Face-to-face Seminar (Research-oriented teaching, where students develop research skills and techniques). During the seminars learners were asked to prepare for and participate in a Learning Set Conversation (LSC) which was facilitated by tutor. As a Learning Set, seated in circular arrangement learners were exploring each

other's research case and research progress. Facing each other, making eye contact, and engaging in a meaningful discussion, breaks down barriers and promotes active participation. Using action learning strategy mentioned above, which 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, helped to make teaching and learning collaborate process, which was one of the aims of this project. With a small difference form active learning, 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' (Revans, 2011).

After each LSC, each member of Learning Set was asked to reflect on their LSC and produce a Reflective Piece of Work Reflective Diaries (RD) which was discussed later with supervisor.

3) 7 one to one supervision sessions (Research-tutored teaching, where students engage in research discussion) having reflective diaries helped learners to have constructive discussion with supervisors.

4) Post-class/self-study working on the IWBP (Research-based teaching, where students undertake research and inquiry). Learners were undertaking a significant research project to explore a work-related problem or business opportunity, integrating theory from taught modules, and proposing strategically relevant and operationally viable recommendations for their organisations.

4.   Reflective Analyses

For teaching and delivery on the thought sessions, instead of traditional case study approach, all elements (research led/tutored teaching, research oriented or research based) of research informed teaching (Healey and Jenkins, 2009), has been introduced by the module leader, focused on real-life problems that client organisations are or were facing. Suggested by Jenkins at al. (2002) when instructor incorporates their own research into teaching, learners perceived their courses as up to date, and this increased engagement as it stimulated intellectual excitement. On the other hand, authors also found that, instructors also becoming enthusiastic about what they are teaching, which helps to create a positive atmosphere during the face-to-face classes which is also very important for enhancing learning and engagement on those programmes. Thus, all module staff were encouraged to incorporate their own or up to date research during the delivery of module. In addition, research active staff including our PhD researchers and colleagues from other institution were invited as a guest speaker to share their research experience with our learners. According to our colleagues, who were involved in teaching and supervisory activities, learners seemed to be more enthusiastic and attentive in classes after introducing this practice. Effectiveness of this approach was also acknowledged by learners. They indicated that having opportunity to work with or supervised by research active staff encourage them to conduct their own research with high quality manner. In addition, it has been observed that this practice also worked well in supervisor-learner engagement and engagement with the material especially in the flipped learning approach.

Majority of students reported that the 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 post-class self-study). As a result, learners could review course materials anytime in their convenience. The LSC during the tutorials also was acknowledged to be effective way of delivering module. Using the LSC during the tutorials and Reflective Diaries (RD) 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.

5.   Data Collection and Ethical Consideration

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. Thus, unfortunately at this stage the author couldn't provide direct quotes from learners' and teaching staffs' feedback, which is an acknowledged limitation of this study (there is an intention for farther developing this limitation). However, few examples presented below (secondary data source) indicate the real-world impact that some of the projects made on the client organisation and beyond. Please note that this is only minor piece of large data from one cohort.

Example 1:

Project Title

Challenges and impact of implementing a 'seven day' consultant led service in Medicine at Basildon Hospital

New model and recommendations for the seven-day consultant led services for the Basildon university hospital in London was recognised to have a positive impact not only on hospital's operational efficiency, but it also believed to have an impact on the quality of care. Developing model for possible change based on resource-based view and dynamic capabilities theory and testing it as a Pilot project has indicated that proposed change would provide value to patients and to other taxpayer since the services provided through this change believed to be a cost and resource effective.

Example 2:

Project Title

How to reduce disproportionality and thus build trust and confidence within the communities that we serve.

The aim of the project was to understand why disproportionality exists within Bedfordshire and the impact police culture could be having on the decision to arrest and whether those arrests could have been avoided.

The project has been a success by not only understanding the existence of disproportionality within Bedfordshire but having provided valuable research material that has given an insight into potential causes of disproportionality and how it relates to organisational culture. The project has provided opportunity to work in partnership with other agencies and the communities of Bedfordshire to make improvements.

6. Conclusion

The innovative methods discussed in this paper were employed to address the above-mentioned challenge, to demonstrate a real-world impact for those involved in project, in addition to ensuring learners' personal and professional development by making teaching and learning a collaborative process. The discussion is based on the author's personal reflection and experience, delivering IWBP module on one of the EE programmes in one of the UK's higher education institutions.

Effectiveness of the introduced methods and recommendations are based on learners' feedback and the secondary data that demonstrates the impact for the client organisation. 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 ethics approval, which is an acknowledged limitation of this study, however there is an intention for farther developing this limitation.

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