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Self-directed learning on a full-time MBA – A cautionary tale

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a cautionary tale of the complexities of implementing peer learning groups (PLG's) and blended learning approaches for promoting self-directed learning (SDL) in the context of competing objectives for staff and students on a full-time MBA module in the field of HRM. We suggest that existing literature on PLG's and SDL does not, so far, explore in detail messy contexts where organisational pressures on teaching teams lead to multiple, conflicting objectives that do not allow for a rational delivery of the anticipated pedagogic strategy. Recognising further the relatively limited amount of studies within a HRM teaching context, we seek to contribute to the SDL literature by outlining the problems that can occur when there are hidden objectives behind the use of SDL. We further suggest that the full-time MBA context may be particularly opposed to the use of SDL due to specific student expectations of 'appropriate' modes of delivery.

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1. Introduction

Within UK business schools, MBA programmes tend to play a significant role in terms of income generation and reputation management. Competitive advantage over MBA offerings by other business schools is a continuous challenge that tends to be heavily influenced by the content and teaching excellence a specific business school can offer. The competition for potential future students is fierce and the demands on staff teaching on MBA programmes are complex (Yeadon & Worsdale, 2012). MBA cohorts can and will demand an excellent learning and networking experience that drives their career forward in exchange for the high fees they pay. This puts a constant pressure onto staff to develop module learning and teaching strategies that are as engaging as possible and with clearly demonstrated and perceived learning outcomes. These demands further need to be seen in context of a paradigm shift in teaching away from a tutor-led approach towards one that provides greater opportunities for students to engage, feel empowered and confident about their own learning (Brady, 2013; Smith, 2000). Thus, MBA programmes in common with other Business programmes are encouraged by a widening body of research to adopt non-traditional pedagogic strategies (Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010) such as Problem Based Learning (PBL) to facilitate Self-Directed Learning (SDL) skills. These skills are seen as essential for lifelong learning and success in the business world. Hay, Peltier, and Drago (2004) further report on the increasing importance for MBA programmes to utilise blended and online learning facilities that accommodate the students' demands for flexibility and quality of provision.

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This generally positive outlook on SDL has been challenged by some studies showing that evidence is often too inconclusive to support the uncritical application of such approaches (e.g. Kremer & McGuinness, 1998; Yeadon & Worsdale, 2012). Arbaugh, Desai, Rau, and Sridhar (2010) add that some areas of management studies, such as the field of HRM, remain widely under-researched in this domain. Chew (2009) further warns that MBA students may be particularly inexperienced and unfamiliar with a SDL approach to teaching, yet does not offer evidence to support this warning.

This article contributes to our understanding of the complexity and potential problems of introducing SDL in a full-time MBA context through a cautionary tale and evaluation of one module leader's attempt to introduce a peer learning approach to facilitate the development of SDL skills and digital literacy skills of full-time MBA students studying HRM. The module design was informed by a wide literature review on the subject of SDL and peer learning in face-to-face situations and in virtual learning environments as well as an informal inquiry into equivalent learning groups within other UK-based MBA programmes. Yet, despite this research informed design, there were also other, divergent objectives in place that led to a disappointing experience of students and staff with this approach. Such tensions have not been adequately recognised in the literature and the analysis of the cautionary tale in this article contributes to our understanding of SDL in the context of MBA students and in light of diverging objectives for the design of SDL.

The rest of this article is divided into four sections. First of all, it will provide a brief review of the literature on self-directed learning and peer learning offline and online. A second section will then focus on methods and outline the specific features of the SDL strategy adopted in this case as well as the methods employed in evaluating the success of this strategy. A third section discusses the main findings on student perceptions and interactions on the SDL activities and the final two sections contain the discussion of these findings and conclusions from this cautionary tale.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self-directed learning

Defining Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is problematic as the spectrum of meanings varies from person to person and institution to institution and from a variety of theoretical perspectives (Reagan, 2005). We draw here on Knowles' (1975) classic definition that describes SDL as

> 'a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes' (p. 18).

Although not without critics (e.g. Hammond & Collins, 1991) the acknowledgement of interaction sets SDL clearly within the constructionist paradigm which suggests that only when students are engaged actively in their own learning will deep learning occur (Boud, 1988). The skills they develop along the way are highly prized by employers and could go some way to explain their growing popularity in Business Schools. As the SDL approach under review in this article uses peer learning groups as a tool to enhance self-directed learning online and offline, we will briefly review key findings from the peer learning and virtual learning environment literatures.

2.2. Peer learning groups as a tool for self-directed learning

There has been a fair amount of research on group-based learning (e.g. Beaty, 2003; Belbin, 1993; Biggs, 2003; Gersick, 1990; Kolb, 1984; Overton, 2003; Revans, 1982; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Yeadon & Worsdale, 2012) stressing the benefits of group work in general. Boud and Lee (2005) suggest that the absence of the tutor reduces the barriers of power and learning is enabled through greater engagement and open communication. Biggs (2003) adds that students will learn from peers within group work more easily than from the tutor as they have to use their own words and explanations to make sense of module material or a specific task. Keppell, Au, Ma, and Chan (2006) and Smith (2000) argue that such collaborative learning promotes lifelong learning and enhances capabilities of teamwork, interpersonal skills and independent, self-empowered learning of students (Kremer & McGuinness, 1998). Within an increasingly cost-oriented higher education context, peer learning also allows for innovative and cost-effective teaching methods (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007; Kremer & McGuinness, 1998; Topping, 2005).

Yet, it is important to recognise that research has provided mixed evidence with regards to peer learning's promise to create superior learning experiences. Studies such as Crawford (2005), King (2002), Kremer and McGuinness (1998), Ravenscroft, Buckless, McCombs, and Zuckerman (1995) and Yamarik (2007) have all explored specific cases of peer learning and whilst they have found positive impact on student participation, performance, attention levels and cognitive processes, it is important to recognise the contextually bound nature of these studies. In addition, Bacon's (2005) research revealed a negative impact of a group project on content learning. The generalisability of peer learning's positive impact across all contexts hence remains questionable and worth further investigation.

It is also important to note other cautionary voices in relation to peer learning. DeVita (2001), Johnson et al. (2007), Topping (2005) and Yeadon & Worsdale (2012) stress the dangers of using peer learning in group work without care, proper design and purely as a means to cost reduction and hence advocate the need for structure and/or facilitation of peer learning activities and its embedding in the wider course design and/or assessment. Sweeney, Weaven, and Herington (2008)

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