**Integrating Managerial Skills into the Business Curriculum: Can we Teach Longitudinally?**

**Abstract**

In this roundtable session, we will discuss methods to integrate managerial-skill teaching into core business courses. We will start the session by sharing our experience with a managerial-skill course designed to cut across courses and semesters. Using data from participants of this course in two countries (U.S. and Peru), we will briefly discuss the effectiveness of our instruction. Our goal is to generate a debate on the viability of challenging instruction compressed in standard time intervals (e.g., semesters). We hope to identify best practices dealing with integrating skill-development across academic terms.

**Keywords:** Curriculum design, longitudinal teaching, managerial skills*.*

**Introduction**

It has been three decades since Porter and McKibbin (1988) questioned the capacity of business schools to equip students for a successful managerial career. The number of authors that in many ways echo Porter and McKibbin continues to accumulate (e.g., Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Brink & Costigan, 2015, Varela, 2009). A commonality of these criticisms is that attention in MBA programs to the development of managerial skills is deficient (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011). While employers express satisfaction with MBA-graduates’ learning of functional skills (e.g., finance), outcomes associated with the so-called soft skills that constitute the foundation of managers’ role have been under fire (Datar, Garvin, & Cullen 2010). We use *soft skills* here in reference to the interpersonal (e.g., motivating others) and intrapersonal (e.g., time management) capacities that allow managers to operate.

One of the challenges we face in advancing soft skills in academia deals with the match between their nature and the structure of MBA curricula. As opposed to capacities targeted in functional-based courses (e.g., accounting), soft skills lack granular prescriptions for performance (Waters, 1980). Instructors can hardly specify a narrowly defined set of actions that guarantee successful execution. Admittedly, well-grounded theories provide behavioral guidelines (e.g., transformational theory), but performance hinges on idiosyncratic interpretations of skilled action, raising questions on the extent to which traditional teaching (e.g., lecturing) may advance behavioral competencies that allow ample discretion. From a review of the literature, Paglis (2012) advocates for a minimum of six steps for soft-skill development: Pre-assessment, conceptual learning, modeling, practice, feedback, and application. To maximize development, the steps should be paced and distanced, posing significant challenges to instructors interested in advancing several skills in a regular term (e.g., semester). To complicate matters, experts call for varied and substantial practice opportunities (e.g., Holman, Pavlica, & Thorpe, 1997) and, when possible, duplication of the steps above as learning advances in a slow trial-and-error process that reflects a scaffolding development (e.g., Burke, Scheurer, & Meredith, 2007). This gradual view of learning accentuates the challenges of instruction compressed in standard time intervals (academic semesters) and raises concerns with respect to the possibility of achieving substantial soft-skill development under conventional curriculum structures.

Divided in academic terms, business curriculum allocates content into series of areas of knowledge that build from each other. While moving throughout courses, participants are expected to integrate knowledge into mental structures that increase proficiency and render applicable class materials. Yet, MBA learning has been the target of substantial criticism first, because the assumed integration is weak. Seemingly, participants generate a silos-based knowledge without the amalgamation that leads to appreciate the value of combining knowledge from distinct business functions (Campbell, Heriot, & Finney, 2006). And second, because MBA teaching overemphasizes conceptual (as opposed to experiential) learning, thus keeping knowledge secluded from real applications (e.g., Navarro, 2008). Many call for a revision of graduate-business curriculum that achieves palpable integration with topics cutting across the artificial boundaries of semesters and courses (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2000). Blasco (2016) adds that any curricula revision must consider *space* as a central feature. Space implies an expansion of participants’ time to meditate contents (cognitive space), reflect on outcomes (feedback space), and find optimal ways to deal with assignments (autonomy space).

In the first author’s school, a committee considered *integration* and *space* when tasked with the goal of revising how soft skills are taught in the MBA. The resulting instruction departs from typical offer in many respects. First, the committee agreed on a longitudinal format. Rather than single-semester delivery, content and credit hours were allocated throughout semesters and courses. Second, for cognitive and feedback space purposes, the assessment-feedback-reflection iteration of soft skills is repeated several times throughout the MBA. Finally, to increase autonomy, grading downplays traditional evaluation methods (e.g., exams). Participants are required to complete basic requirements (participate in assessments, reflect on reports) and then, are free to choose between various strategies for skill development.

The instruction above was originally implemented in the fall of 2015 in a southern university in the U.S. Its relative success led to a replication in a Business school in Lima, Peru in 2017. In a roundtable-discussion format, we will briefly share our experiences from both locations. We will use these experiences to generate a debate on the effectiveness of some of the instruction’s features and explore options that, by breaking from traditional teaching (e.g., semester-based), could lead to superior results. Thus, the central goal of the session is to discuss alternatives to integrate managerial-skill teaching into the business curriculum. While our experience is primarily with graduate business programs, we anticipate the discussion to be appealing for an audience of faculty teaching managerial skills either at the undergraduate or graduate level.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Several learning theories informed our instructional design. Anderson’s (1982) Stage theory postulates that skills transit through a sequence of stages that range from unprocessed data (i.e., declarative knowledge) to mental schemas that guide effortless and subconscious execution. Consequently, our instruction initiates with ensuring that participants apprehend basic conceptual information on skills (i.e., lecturing, quizzes). To advance declarative knowledge, Stage theory calls for adding rules of application. Individuals must identify procedures that render learned information applicable. Two conditions for this transition are key: Practice and reflection. By experimenting and validating methods of application, practice enables subjects to employ information. Kolb’s (1984) Experiential learning theory similarly urges practice. But in both Experiential and Stage theory, it is not the experience itself what promotes development; it is the ensuing reflection that leads subjects to reconstrue the experience and be more selective in the procedures driving future applications. To ensure practice and reflection, our instructional design promotes, documents, and reports on skill applications throughout MBA courses.

Social learning (Bandura, 1986) and Action learning theory (Revans, 1997) also informed the course design. Unique to social learning is the heavy emphasis on observation. Learning advances by scrutinizing others’ actions and weighting the value of replicating analogous activities. To promote observation, our instruction relies on classmates as raters. Evaluating others is expected to trigger cognitions that lead to self-improvement. Additionally, within the set of dialogue theories (e.g., Palincsar, 1998), Action learning advocates for verbal exchanges. Dialogues are instrumental for questioning and discovering methods that enhance skilled action. Thus, our instruction includes peer-coaching exercises expected to facilitate discussions that support skill evolution. During the roundtable session, we will briefly review the match between the learning theories above and the features of our instruction.

Additionally, as noted above, integration (see Hamilton et al. 2000) in the form of repetitive skill applications and assessments throughout courses and, space (see Blasco 2016) in the form of longitudinal course design, extended time to reflect, and increase discretion to participate and to choose methods for skill improvement were key in the revision of our instruction. We will also review these curricula principles during the roundtable session.

**Session Description**

The session will start with a definition of the goals as defined above. Then, for about 20 minutes, we plan for a description of the courses we currently delivery in both the U.S. and Peru. We will provide handouts illustrating the structure of the course, sample of class materials (assessments, reports), and pictures that illustrate some of the learning experiences we implement. If possible (contingent on the technology available) we will also present 3-mins. clips that illustrate some of the experiential-learning activities (e.g., blindfolded exercises) we use in the course.

Since we have collected participants’ data on skills development over the last two years, we will devote the following 5-10 minutes to share with the audience evidence on learning outcomes. Our goal is to increase participants’ awareness on what features of the instruction seem to be effective, considering the methods we use to evaluate learning.

We will use the remaining 30 minutes of the session to brainstorm on questions around the central goal of the session. Some of the questions to guide this discussion include: (1) What are the options to systematically integrate managerial skills into business courses? (2) Longitudinal (across semester) versus traditional (semester-based) teaching of managerial skills. Pros and cons. (3) Key challenges in integrating managerial skills into core business courses. How do we tackle such challenges? (4) Are all skills we normally teach (e.g., teamwork, conflict management) equally amenable for integration in the Business curricula? (5) Pedagogies (e.g., reflection, readings) that lead to soft-skill improvement.

We expect the audience’s participation to lead the discussion in different directions. So, we view the list of questions above as mere guideline for the exchange. Our goal is to moderate a discussion around the notion of “integrating managerial skills into the business curricula.” We hope the discussion will open avenues for collaboration with participants interested in duplicating / adapting some of the pedagogies we will share. We also expect to find common grounds for colleagues interested in expanding a line of research that explores the effectiveness of distinct methods to integrate managerial skills into the business curricula.

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