**MOBTS Oceania Conference 27 January – 29 January 2021**

**Submission for Session Format - Activity / Exercise**

**Session Title: Virtual Action Learning to Enhance Student Engagement – An example of application at the post-graduate level**

**Abstract:**

One of the challenges facing higher education in a post Covid-19 environment is student engagement, especially when faced with virtual teaching and learning demands. A return to face-to-face teaching may involve blended teaching, resulting in student engagement continuing to be an ongoing challenge within higher education into the future. As experiential learning provides fertile ground for teaching innovation, a return to traditional action learning, albeit in a virtual environment, should be a key focus. This exercise presents an application of virtual action learning in a post-graduate unit at the Sydney-based National Institute for Management and Commerce (“IMC”).

**Key Words:** Action learning; Student engagement; Virtual teaching

**Introduction:**

Given how fundamental student engagement is to higher education learning and teaching, many now face the key challenge of developing innovative approaches to designing and delivering course content and delivery in a manner that is consistent with a decline in traditional face-to-face teaching for the foreseeable future. The interdependencies of teacher, student, and content have been radically altered by developments in technology and rising expectations from students themselves, regulators and governments, and communities, including employers. In the case of Business Schools, this is also occurring at a time when their relevance is increasingly being questioned (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005), especially given the widening gap in the research-practitioner divide (Banks et al., 2016; Rosenbaum & More, 2019).

These disruptions of the status quo demand a refocus and revitalized perspective on student engagement to enhance student learning, listening better to student voices, and ensuring the best of pedagogical approaches for enrolment, retention, progression and successful learning outcomes through to graduation, career, and lifelong learning.

One worthwhile approach, and the subject of this Conference Activity, is the development of action learning as an approach to both the design and delivery of undergraduate and postgraduate course content. If successfully deployed in both face-to-face and virtual formats, it can support the necessary collaborative approach to problem solving as well as the learning that underpins it (Mumford, 1997). Action learning (Coghlan & Rigg, 2012) provides a platform for maximising student engagement, given the active involvement of students in the process of questioning and reflection, to achieve understanding that informs solution development and, hence, learning. The essence here resides in the basis for the origins of action learning, namely, L = P+Q (Revans, 1982), where L = learning, P = programmed knowledge, and Q = insightful questions. The extension of this original equation to include R, for reflection, subsequently followed (Marquardt, Leonard, Freedman, & Hill, 2009).

This exercise evidences an approach to action learning in a virtual environment and picks up on recent themes in redesigning traditional classroom practice to enhance student engagement in blended learning (Shohel et al, 2020). It seeks to engage students by combining acquired questioning skills and interrogating available information sourced from lectures and referenced source materials. This is augmented by the process of formally reflecting on both the responses to those insightful questions, as well as the analysis of available knowledge, all endeavoring to answer the unique challenges that are placed before them. These challenges are indicative of real-world issues identified in the key areas of the Unit, in this case, ‘Leadership and Ethical Behaviour’, being the compulsory unit within all of the postgraduate programs at the IMC.

**Theoretical Foundations / Teaching Implications:**

The theoretical foundations upon which this exercise is predicated include the following:

* Collaborative problem solving as a means of accentuating learning (Mumford, 1997)
* Action Learning as a means of maximising student engagement (Revans, 1982)
* Blended learning as a mechanism to address current tertiary education challenges (Shohel, Cann, & Atherton, 2020)

This session contributes to effective teaching and learning in the field of management by identifying a particular approach to the design and delivery of subject matter content. Its focus on collaboration among a student cohort is the basis for learning a range of appropriate soft skills in the pursuit of learning about ethical leadership and its underlying skills. The approach engages students in the art of questioning to achieve deeper understanding of both the subject and themselves as learners. When combined with reflection, it enables them to apply those deeper insights to problem resolution. The art of collaboration, at this level, connects well with the realities they will face in management positions, where effective group interactions are becoming widely accepted as the norm for organisational problem solving. It is suggested that the predominant focus on effective student engagement that the approach identified in this exercise, may assist in the broader objectives around student engagement. It does so by providing ways and means of challenging students to apply technical skills, coupled with wide-ranging personal skills, to resolving challenges that are multi-dimensional, requiring a focus on issues of cultural and gender diversity, as well as differing technical backgrounds and experiences.

**Learning Objectives specific to this exercise:**

The overall Unit Learning Objectives are as follows:

1. Identify and critique alternative theories of leadership and ethics relevant for business decision-making.
2. Analyse different leadership styles and evaluate their potential impact on corporate governance and behaviour.
3. Evaluate the relationship between leadership techniques and organisation power dynamics to address ethical dilemmas.
4. Analyse and resolve ethical dilemmas found by business leaders in commercial settings.
5. Develop persuasive arguments that communicate theoretical constructs and professional decisions to professionals and non-professionals.
6. Reflect critically on your own leadership style to enhance your effectiveness in leading others and managing change.

Learning Objectives 4 and 6 are specifically targeted by this Virtual Action Learning process.

**Exercise Overview:**

The activity is designed and structured as a virtual action learning process and accordingly involves the following:

1. Logistics

* Allow 75 mins
* Participants will be provided with details of the ‘challenge’ that they need to address. This challenge needs to be brief so that its details can be absorbed by students within a 10-minute reading period
* One member of the group will need to volunteer to be ‘timekeeper’
* As an online process being conducted within a Zoom Breakout Session (or equivalent), it is recommended that a maximum of 5 members be assigned to each group

1. Flow of Exercise

* In open class, the action learning process is to be presented, with the focus of the process to be identified. This is undertaken before the breakout session commences and ensures participants understand the procedural nature of action learning. Accordingly, it is recommended that this introduction to the concept and practice of action learning should be undertaken at an earlier lecture/session to enable students to gain some level of comfort with its processes.
* Once the groups are formed in the breakout session, participants do NOT focus on problem resolution, but rather ensure that they are asking questions of each other in order to ensure they have complete clarity on what the challenge means, as well as clarity as to what they are ‘resolving’. During this period, they also need to agree on what additional information they may need to source from any online resource available to them at the time. It is suggested to them that they allow a maximum of 15 minutes ‘questioning period’.
* Each member of the group presents one idea in response to the challenge, taking on board what they know or have learned from lectures, and what they have gleaned from any brief online research that they have undertaken. This presentation by the group member should be for a maximum of 2 minutes per individual. Following each group members presentation, other members of the group can ask one question of the presenter, with the question being focused on either seeking clarification OR challenging what has been said in that presentation. Each question should be responded to by the presenter. This process of questioning should continue for a maximum of 45 minutes.
* Group members then discuss their opinions regarding the challenge with which they have been presented. Taking on board the feedback that each member has received from their ideas and their research, and reflecting on these, the Group develops its solution. One member of the group should be appointed to present the Group’s findings to the open class. It is recommended that this process of final review and positioning take 15 minutes.

1. Variations

* Maximum group size is 8 – 10; however this size would necessitate a longer time period of up to 120 minutes for the exercise.
* A further variation could be multiple sessions for the same group, undertaken over a number of lectures. This could occur over 3 sessions (totaling 6 hours) and, potentially, be the basis for an assessment task, where a written assessable report would be an outcome. In this configuration, the following sessions, each of 2 hours duration, would be identified:
  + First session – first stage group questioning and researching
  + Second session – Group member individual presentations and feedback through questioning process
  + Third session – open Group discussion and problem solving, based on individual and group reflection on the questioning and feedback session
  + Assessable Report writing – this could either be a group or individual report and would cover the group processes (virtual teams) leading to the allotted challenge resolution

1. Debriefing guidelines

* Students are to provide written feedback via a student survey which would respond to the following questions pertaining to their experience in the virtual action learning process (this could be applied in both the short-form as well as the long-form of the exercise):
  + Appropriateness of the Group challenge
  + Experience of group interactions
  + Dealing with incalcitrant members
  + Process of questioning
  + Effectiveness of group and individual reflection

**Session Description:**

* The session will be conducted as a virtual action learning activity which will be a 60-minute session, representing a slightly truncated version of the ‘normal’ session. The first 15 minutes will provide attendees a detailed understanding of the process and details as to what will be expected of them during the ensuing 45 minutes of the remainder of the session
* The singular ‘challenge’ which all groups need to consider and respond to will be provided during the opening 15 minutes of the session
* Depending on the number of attendees, breakout rooms constituting 10 participants will be developed, with these being categorised randomly, using the Zoom breakout room allocation tool
* Breakout room discussions, as per the instructions and guidelines, will be undertaken for the next 30 minutes, following which all attendees will return to the open ‘classroom’ where one member from each Group will present a brief verbal report detailing the following:
  + What did their Group resolve with regards the Challenge?
  + How did the Group function?
  + To what extent did the questioning process add value to the overall experience?

**References:**

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