A Practitioner Perspective: Pushing the Limits of Online Learning

Gyula Julius Dobos

Abstract *Pushing the limits of online learning* is making a case for hybrid learning by comparing the high productivity in real-time online team learning versus traditional classroom-based learning, from the perspective of a high-level undergraduate collaborative project series that utilizes both systems. The main focus is on identifying the methods and tools that make individual and team learning more effective in a hybrid system, as opposed to traditional education taking place only on ground or by exclusively using a virtual classroom as a more efficient platform in education. Online learning platforms can form productivity-enhancing opportunities, which supplement but don't fully replace on-campus meetings. A hybrid approach, which provides both an excellent utilization of resources and a practical, personal learning experience via human interactions, can best support the development of the invaluable soft skills essential in the world of business and entrepreneurship today.

Keywords Online business education • Collaborative environment • Project-based learning • Soft-skill development for business • Hybrid education platform

1 Introduction and Background

As a film and music business professional and business owner in Europe, in the United States and online for over two decades, I have witnessed the power of hands-on experience-based learning in a wide range of professional environments since the early 1990s. I have also seen the growing importance of soft skills and watched business communication and interpersonal skills igniting and breaking businesses. After all, what are the professional skills worth if a professional can't get a career job or if a business owner can't get (or keep) a client to sell the talents, ideas, products, and services to? While the popular platforms both for business education and for conducting business have gone through a major shift during the past decade, I continue to experience an ever-growing need for a mix of trade-specific skills and soft skills that are essential for employees, employers, entrepreneurs, and

G.J. Dobos (✉)
Cogswell College, Sunnyvale, CA, USA
e-mail: julius@thecreativeshop.com

A. Khare, D. Hurst (eds.), *On the Line*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-62776-2_17

freelancers alike in today's digital media businesses. Using technology is supposed to make operations easier, but it can also disconnect us, becoming a layer that makes it harder for a provider-client relationship to form and thrive. The same can be said about online business education: technology can enable better learning, but it can also diminish the teaching effectiveness in some of the most practical skills in business.

In the Western culture, business is based on market balance and involves competition within specialized fields. Therefore, professional education at the dawn of the twenty-first century has to be practical – especially in highly competitive and long-established fields, like media production, in which professionals might represent several generations and their diverse approaches to business – all in the same field and within the same economy. A virtual reality start-up might be doing business with an IT services vendor, and their way of conducting business, communication, business strategies, etc., may be similar. However, they both may need to work with an import-shipping company, a business that may be operated in a more traditional business culture. Today's business professional may need to work well with the "old school" and the "new school" businesses alike.

Business education must be practical not only in a sense of building professional skills and experience but also in armoring graduates with soft skills, which they must possess in order to join the workforce or develop their own ventures. The author brought this philosophy from the music- and film production industries, when he joined higher education as a Distinguished Lecturer at Cogswell College of Silicon Valley in 2012. Education had already been transitioning from the on-campus model to online platforms, and the goal was to use a mix of benefits from both.

The first challenge lied in the fact that, while new platforms and tools were plentiful, content specifically created for supporting these new platforms was insufficient and generic. Technologies evolve rapidly, but teaching methods take time to be introduced, tested, and embraced. Education is trying to keep up with the pace of change in technology, but quick adaptations of new tools often lack the development of new methods and content to accompany such new tools. Not finding existing programs that were suitable for conversion into the real-life-driven, practical approach the author wanted to use, he created a new, professional program concept along with Cogswell Faculty Anthony Dias; the program is now known as MediaWorks. This interdisciplinary, collaborative, hands-on program aims at putting students through a real-life business experience during their junior and senior years. Within the educational framework, actual business is being conducted between fully involved parties: corporate clients and teams of undergraduate college students. The specialized teams consist of students from various disciplines, such as digital audio production, arts and animation, digital media management, and business administration. Two directors, who are also faculty members, are leading the work. MediaWorks is a highly practical learning experience; students produce complex media projects for established companies and organizations with actual needs, working under the pressure of high client expectations and tight deadlines. The experience involves on-campus and online meetings, collaboration between

individuals and teams, in-person and remote project planning and project management, and plenty of hands-on work. Recently the focus has been expanded with business development, analysis of service effectiveness, formulation of business strategies, and presentations. All of these tasks are carried out by students. Going beyond an internship or a one-off industry-academia collaborative project with an end date, the program has been continuously running with great success for 4 years and has been responsible for collaborations between Fortune 500 companies, international brands, and an increasing number of students. The conclusions discussed here are based on the analysis of various methods and platforms used by the directors, the experience of students, instructors, and clients of the past 4 years.

2 Offline Versus Online Productivity

What is the goal of online learning form the students' perspective? Virtual location? Convenience? Freedom with their schedule? What *should* be the goal of this relatively new platform?

Whether we're teaching entrepreneurship, business administration, or media production, online learning should not be seen as a replacement for the in-person classroom experience but rather as a way to enhance the experience of learning, as well as putting students through the experience and challenges of the way real-life business is conducted in the twenty-first century: both online and offline. This is often referred to as the hybrid learning system: a combination of online and on-ground sessions during a course or program. Another desired outcome of online learning is to create a classroom-like experience, however, not a static kind, where information, ideas, and questions travel in a single direction at a given time between two collectives (teachers to students or students to teachers), rather, where the collective experience and information flow in every direction between every member of a group or several groups in real time, creating a true collaborative learning environment.

The MediaWorks project was created to fill the gaps between the traditional method of learning and today's professional business practices. The long list of such gaps include trade-specific and soft skills development, on-campus and real-time online collaboration for business and media production, and online team-building and project management. More importantly, the program aims to create a bridge between simulation work and conducting business with real-life clients that have actual service or product needs. Without this bridge, graduates often face the sudden need to apply business skills in the professional field right after graduation – which is not a realistic expectation given the lack of opportunity to develop those skills, not to mention the time it takes to acclimatize to today's business culture, in which those skills are expected to be used from the first week on the job (and some even at the job interview). Starting this acclimatization years before graduation requires a hybrid approach in most fields. During the first 4 years of the program's operation, MediaWorks students have served as a control group and focus group in one,

providing invaluable feedback and opportunities for comparative analysis of the various online and offline methods used.

Student teams and instructors learn to use a wide range of ever-changing platforms and services for collaboration, communication, and project management *while* they are focusing on the production or business tasks at hand, as opposed to learning the communication tools themselves first, before using them for the actual work. The "learning by doing" method not only generates highly practical habits for the student user, it effectively doubles the number of tools students familiarize themselves with within the same amount of time, since no dedicated time is spent on tool-learning.

Online learning is often associated with prerecorded instruction videos, learn-at-your-pace convenience, and limited individual feedback to students. While these passive models might be cost-effective and convenient to students and institutions alike, their effectiveness, as exclusive methods, are low relative to active online learning: real-time discussion and idea sharing (through platforms like Slack), video conferencing (Zoom), real-time written collaboration (Google apps), and file sharing services help to raise the effectiveness and efficiency of building concepts and proposals, production, intra- and inter-team communications, and faculty-student and student-client communications far beyond the basic functions of a standard portal of a learning management system (LMS). For example, during the research and client interview phases of their TEDxSanFrancisco audiovisual project, MediaWorks' Visual and Audio Team members worked together to generate concepts and propose solutions to the client, led by the two directors and a project manager student. The role of directors was that of facilitators, guiding the process of information exchange and concepting. The conversations and brainstorming took place on-site, with the project manager using Google Docs for shared documenting, and the directors using the Canvas LMS for defining expectations and for course management. However, going into production, the team structure changed: the Visual Team enlisted concept artists and animators, led by the project manager, and the Audio Team was further broken down into several sub-teams, each containing a sound designer and a composer. The directors became creative leaders, reviewers, and "client representatives." As the structure changed, so did the methods of communication: the Visual and Audio teams kept using Google Docs, but added Slack, as their choice for real-time, two-way updates available outside of class meetings. File exchange took place over an FTP connection to a cloud server, where the various teams created their own file hierarchy, as well as through an improvised Facebook Group within the Audio Team – both accessible at anytime from anywhere. While this might sound complicated, it was quite the opposite: each team using their *preferred* way of communication for the given tasks, as opposed to being forced to use a set of tools, greatly enhanced individual involvement and team productivity. Directors were also able to manage their teams remotely between class meetings and make immediate decisions when critical updates occurred on weekends and late nights.

Based on the MediaWorks model and the combined advantages of real-time online and real-time offline methods, the many facets of business learning can be grouped into the following three categories:

1. Aspects that can be taught online effectively
2. Aspects that involve practical work performed by students and may be enhanced by the online platform for higher efficiency and effectiveness
3. Aspects that are inherently limited by the nature of online learning and require a hybrid approach for its in-person meeting component

Let us examine each.

2.1 Learning Aspects Suitable for the Online Platform

The need for proper and effective written communication in business cannot be disputed, yet, graduates' average functional English literacy does not meet the expectation of today's competitive and often formal business environment. This is one of the areas where participants should benefit from using an online platform, i.e., writing proposals, business plans, etc. While online platforms, helper scripts and flexible templates can certainly help to develop business writing and composition skills by providing an efficient feedback mechanism, it should be noted that the use of spell-check and phrasing correction functions of software can develop a reliance on such automated help. Employees might be required to create a proposal or memo at a jobsite or in a meeting room, where correction software (or a computer, for that matter) might not be available; situations of this type can get new employees who are overly reliant on such software into trouble quickly. In online learning platforms, disabling grammar-correction scripts, phrasing-recommendation functions, and the ability to paste text from other software can ensure that students properly develop unaided business writing skills.

Project planning can be greatly enhanced by the use of online platforms. Students have the option at their fingertips to access information about the project; view notes from other project team members, clients, and project managers; access and cross-reference multiple schedules and desired deliverables; and work collaboratively in real time to establish a plan that takes each subject expert's input into consideration. They can do all this and more, without having to walk across the classroom to obtain pieces of information one by one in person as they used to do in the classrooms; the online process is not only more efficient but also invaluable in the development of analytical and planning skills. Today, students can effectively create complex plans that involve dozens of parties from diverse fields, complex tasks that might have given them a headache 20 years ago.

Students tend to analyze others' work with better focus and more accuracy online. Comparisons between students critiquing each other's work online and in-person also revealed that they are more comfortable with, therefore more accurate

when analyzing another student's work in the absence of that work's creator. Such unbiased analysis is a must-have skill in business, and the online platform encourages students to critique and even self-critique work more objectively online in real time. It is worth noting, however, that on a more advanced level, the process of constructively critiquing work in the presence of the creator of the work should be also practiced by students, acting both as providers and receivers of critique.

MediaWorks students have been observed to perform critical thinking and analysis quicker and more objectively online, typically from the comfort of their home, when such analysis was performed individually, relative to similar individual work analysis done in classes. However, the directors did not encounter a significant difference between the effectiveness of collaborative analysis performed by student teams online and in person. This seems to be due to most individuals' ability to better focus on analysis tasks when working alone in an environment with less distraction; in a team scenario, the advantage of several team member's diverse views is canceled out by the difference between team members' varied personalities and approaches. The conclusion seems to be that students perform critical thinking and analysis most effectively when they are working individually online but subsequently discuss their findings collectively in person.

While students with extrovert personalities or higher self-confidence may enjoy sharing their critical thinking and creative thinking processes, experimenting with ideas on the spot in front of a class is not an exciting proposal for everyone. The online platform has a clear advantage for the type of students who prefer to think their ideas over and over before sharing them with a group of peers or with clients. Others thrive in the on-site collaborative environment. A wide range of projects have shown that the creativity of the more inward-turning students often gets compromised, and some ideas and solutions don't even surface when the online learning platform, as an optional brainstorming space, is removed. For the highly introvert students, the on-site practice might be severely detrimental, especially in larger teams. Moreover, not providing the online platform for these students' ideas to surface may be a loss for the team as well, for which the same students would provide a valuable contribution online. In a sense, the online platform gives students who tend to find solutions when removed from a high-pressure offline situation an even chance at creative thinking and expression. Taking this even farther, providing the online platform can help project managers and instructors to realize the intellectual power that the "inward-facing deep thinker"-type of students can provide to their project. Similarly, the online platform may be a benefit for instructors to teach students with a more introvert personality and help develop their critical and creative thinking skills in their preferred environment.

In business learning, students may be required to multitask: gather, process, and provide information at the same time, while also taking notes, memorizing facts, and employing critical thinking and reasoning. Over 20 projects involving 12 different student teams (of 10–20 students each) have shown an advantage of online learning over in-class learning in the memorization of factual information. As an in-person session typically takes place in a faster-paced environment with more potential distraction, it's no surprise that students take advantage of the online

learning model by separating tasks and sequencing them in their preferred order. While in-person sessions might not be avoided in real-life business, the clear separation of tasks between offline and online sessions in a course will enhance the quality of learning outcomes.

For example, MediaWorks students meeting with an instructor, project manager, or client in an on-ground class might be exposed to both statistical and big-picture information (like metrics and branding guidelines) and be required to analyze and interpret findings and formulate a plan while taking notes at the same time. Should they need to revisit their thinking or the information their business plan is based on later, they would have to rely on their notes taken in the same class session when they were preoccupied with performing multiple other tasks, too. However, when the same set of tasks are performed using an online platform, students tend to focus on each task separately, for example, they might be taking notes real time, memorize information subsequently, and evaluate their findings in yet another step, before formulating a plan. This more deeply memorized information will then become readily accessible for students in the future while they are performing the subsequent tasks; this often eliminates the need to refer back to notes, rethink a previously established intent or business plan, and so on. Only by changing the platform, the quality of note taking, memorization, analysis, and any other single-focus task can be improved. This is not unlike the difference between keeping information on one's hard drive and in their computer's RAM; it is more effective to "paste," for example, numerical information from RAM without interrupting the workflow than to start a lengthy search on a hard drive for such data when it is needed.

Probably the most obvious benefits of a hybrid learning system are team learning and multidisciplinary collaborations. Various online platforms allow students to synchronize their work and progress with other parties that are involved in the project, without having to coordinate on-site meetings – which are often not possible and would limit the learning outcomes of students in every group. Online collaboration tools such as Slack allow most younger and tech-savvy students to experience learning as part work, part fun, given their interest in the tool themselves. It's not hard to imagine how a notification about some new information or action taken by another team member appearing on a student's smartphone can prompt an immediate reaction or response, similar to a Facebook post or other social networking events. Whether being connected 24/7 is a benefit or curse for the human psyche is debatable, but it certainly allows educators to run projects in a way they replicate the real-life business experience most accurately. This, in turn, prepares graduates for a smooth postgraduation transition into a professional lifestyle, which is much different from the student life they get used to while taking traditional classes.

When students are working together online, sharing their research with each other, summarizing their collective findings, and brainstorming as a team rather than a class, project after project the student team as a collective becomes more effective online than in a classroom. Feedback from students reveals that this is due to their activities taking place on their own terms. While this might sound scary at first, students actually tend to get more involved in the work and develop a stronger sense of ownership of projects, when they choose the time and place to work on

them, as opposed to feeling like they are forced to work together at a given time (class) and place (classroom). Of course, students who are prone to getting sidetracked easily or have low interest in the subject will not do well and might contribute to the team's efforts less than they would in a traditional class on campus. A hybrid approach (the combination of on-ground and online classes) can make practical learning more efficient and productive for most while keeping each student team member motivated and accountable for their contribution.

Real-time editing of written documents, preparing proposals as a group by brainstorming, and drawing ideas on a shared screen are examples of tasks that can be accomplished offline but are much less efficient or collaborative due to physical limitations, like shared space and time, and due to the lack of synchronized document updates between participants' document copies. In a way, online platforms that bring together many contributors real time, such as Google Docs, enable students to experience the *process* that other students use and the difference in the *ways* contributors think about similar problems; these platforms essentially enable students to study a diverse set of *approaches* in a familiar situation – without much input from an instructor. This is powerful!

2.2 Practical Learning Enhanced by the Online Platform: The Hybrid Learning Approach

Online platforms enable students to work with the class, and possibly with the instructors, more frequently and in smaller increments, than traditional once or twice a week in-class meetings. In an online LMS, information and assignments can be set up in advance, to become available for students between scheduled classes. This can facilitate more in-depth learning and more frequent self-critique and cross feedback between class members and potentially the instructor (via email, LMS messaging, discussion groups, and forums). Providing information or mini-assignments between class meetings can also mimic the often spontaneous nature of real-life business practice, where information may arrive late, and appear at a random frequency, but must be dealt with rapidly.

While instructors' in-class demonstration of practical skills has a stronger advantage for students due to the first-hand experience, online video demonstrations are actually very helpful in developing the most important skill for the next generation of workforce: the ability to adapt. Tutorials delivered online may feel less convincing for students, which forces them to figure out some less obvious elements and "make it work," typically by investing more time into practice and less time into memorization. This essentially allows them to experiment more, make more mistakes, and learn more from their mistakes, to their own advantage. Managing the learning process on their own or with limited external help and turning the challenge into success may also enhance their level of confidence. Both of these outcomes greatly help the development of their ability to adapt to new tools, situations,

and methods, as long as a feedback mechanism, such as an assignment, an evaluation, a test, etc., is in place. While this is true for most skills required in entrepreneurship, business administration, and project management, it is not "safe" in areas where learning or demonstrating proficiency of a skill has important physical aspects or practice requirements. An example is business presentation: the use of facial expressions, tone, body language, and nonverbal communication are skills that business students should practice in real-life class sessions. Future technologies like augmented reality will be likely promoted as tools that eliminate the need for in-person practice via virtual meetings and AR presentations at the student's home, but the best way to practice human interaction will always be real-time same-space human interaction, due to aspects that may also influence a real-life meeting or presentation but are not feasible to be virtualized (such as the scent of the presenter's cologne or perfume, voice projection, sweating, etc.).

As discussed earlier, unexpected receipt of information in business may require rapid response skills. Being able to properly react to such information, whether it's in the form of questions or instructions, is an essential skill in today's accelerated business culture and should be developed in business-focused courses. In one of author's real-world exercises, he unexpectedly brought in the representative of Corning, Inc., a Fortune 300 client to a class meeting. Students had only prepared by researching the client's business online but were not prepared for an in-person meeting. They were expected to ask questions that would prompt answers practically relevant for the development of a business proposal for the same client. One of the students commented after the meeting: "Professor Dobos, this was a really thrilling exercise... but, would you mind to let us know the next time we'll have a meeting like this in advance? My legs were shaking while I was asking my questions." This example should serve a reminder that for all of us there was a first time for everything that we think of as a routine task today and the most challenging element might have not been our professional preparedness, rather our comfort level or our ability to do our best in a given situation. At the same time, business tasks that require fast thinking, decision-making on the spot, fast critical analysis, creative problem-solving are not abilities that students develop during the first week on the job. And, there is no better way to start to practice for these scenarios than by putting students to the tests in a familiar environment. It is essential to give students the chance at some point to go through "live" experiences in real-life situations, like the above client meeting example, as opposed to only interacting with others via a video call from a comfortably familiar environment, like their home. Even the meeting room on campus and a field trip to a corporation's office are such properly less-than-comfortable environments. It is one of the main reasons not to preserve, nor replace, rather expand the traditional on-ground education model with online learning.

On the other hand, as today more business is conducted online than ever before in history, and the pace of this change is accelerating, it is just as essential for business students to be familiar with the practice and etiquette of doing business online, which is obviously best studied and practiced online.

While oral communication skills are included in the hybrid learning approach category, current online platforms don't seem to provide a significant advantage over traditional communication scenarios; the same technology that makes it easy for us to connect the screens of dozens of students online in real time can also make it challenging to provide the focused and effective learning experience of traditional classes. Video conference apps and online LMS video chat features easily replicate the way business video conferences are held every day in the twenty-first century, but these conferences are quite two dimensional; the focus is typically shared between one and six participant screens and capped by the size of our monitors and screen resolutions. It's simply not practical to put 30 tiny faces on one monitor and enable everyone's microphone at the same time for much increased noise floor.

When conducting an online call between the MediaWorks student team and a client, each student is required to be physically present on campus, in the same room, to allow conversations to start in organic ways, often "on the side" between team members and within small improvised groups. In these situations, a pair of microphones are set up in the meeting space, and a wide-angle camera is positioned to show the entire room full of students for the connected parties (typically the client) in the video conference. Even with this setup, the speaking student must move closer to the camera in order for the client to see a student's facial expressions in synch with his or her voice in detail. In reality, our ability to focus on a speaker while perceiving and interacting with the environment (like side conversations) and to turn our head to change our field of view is a human advantage we take for granted but is much limited in today's video chats. This is where augmented reality can come to the rescue, a technology that, when enabled for project meetings, will provide us with the flexibility in participation by providing us with the detailed and the big picture views alike.

In other scenarios, online platforms may enhance the quality of student work by allowing students to learn from more sources than just the instructor: from each other. As a matter of fact, students in group projects might even learn about the point of views, professional fields, and methods of team members in different subject areas as well. In case of MediaWorks, students in different programs regularly seek feedback from each other; in this process, Business Administration students may be learning file organization from the Audio Production students, who may be taking media project management ideas from Arts & Animation team members. This idea of experiencing the work approaches of team members from other disciplines, learning about their challenges and from their mistakes, can give students an invaluable experience and surface-level familiarity with connected fields – a collaboration that would much less likely to exist between departments and programs at an institution with physically separated buildings or more campuses. An additional benefit of such collaborations is networking; it's more likely that alumni of the same institution will hire one another or start a business with a team member with previous good work experience – that is, if they get connected through cross-disciplinary projects.

2.3 Learning Aspects Not Suitable for the Online Platform

Skills and experiences that require the on-ground component of the hybrid methods mentioned above would not be delivered with the same effectiveness exclusively online. Surprisingly, the learning components that failed when the MediaWorks directors added online-only students to on-ground or hybrid production teams were all soft skills-heavy exercises and assignments, as opposed to professional skills. Online students may have improved their knowledge of specialized software over the semester, but they did not show an improvement in business communication skills, reasoning, and presentation skills. Without in-person meetings, online students were not able to "tune into" the professional *work atmosphere* created by directors on-site; therefore, they did not get onto the "same page" with the rest of the production team either. While this might sound like an unfair expectation from students who did not spend time with the class in the same physical space, it should be noted that they were provided the same tools, project information, and resources as all other students and they participated in weekly group progress reports and planning meetings via video calls as well. Online students finished the semester with a lack of practice in group exercises and were generally less satisfied with their experience and the learning outcomes than on-ground students.

Online students' work efficiency didn't seem to improve either. Despite of the project providing a demanding under-pressure "live" work scenario, online students' time management practices were not measurably effected by the course, which is generally described by on-ground students as one of the highest-impact professional growth experiences throughout their studies. Despite of receiving the same course content, equally high level of expectations and deadlines (dictated by clients) as their on-ground classmates, online students reported a magnitude lower level of pressure to excel throughout the proposal, bidding, planning, production, and delivery phases of the project. Their level of accountability was somewhat lower as well, compared to on-ground students with similar GPAs.

An interesting example for the advantage of in-class practice and in-person instructor support comes from a branding project, in which students remotely recorded 1-min videos of themselves, pitching their idea to an active client. Among the several submitted videos, an exceptionally good idea emerged, but it was presented in an unconvincing, rather unprofessional manner, despite of directors' tips for effective remote pitching. The presenting student's superior idea was, not surprisingly, rejected by the client. Had the student captured her pitch on campus with the available professional video equipment and with the real-time guidance of a director or a more experienced student, the presented concept would have been likely chosen for the benefit of the student and the project.

Another example is the atmosphere that formed in class while students were working on an audiovisual marketing communication piece for Panasonic. In this project, individual small teams within MediaWorks were *competing* for the client's final choice and approval. Given the high-profile client, the pressure and excitement resulting from a healthy level of competition and "trade secrecy" between the teams

could be felt in the air in each class meeting and influenced the approaches students took to win the client's approval.

In another instance, directors chose to introduce a project in a rather impactful way, in order to build a sense of personal responsibility and accountability for each student. Directors invited a C-level representative of a large public transportation industry client, AC Transit, to class. The representative disclosed that the outcome of media deliverables expected from students would influence the public opinion on the company's multimillion dollar project and the student-produced film would also accompany the groundbreaking ceremony, to be visited by the US Transportation Secretary as well.

The director's plan paid off: students worked under a healthy pressure with total accountability, passion, and a deep sense of ownership. Comparing the AC Transit project experience with the results of similar projects introduced less impactfully (e.g., published online as assignments), it became clear that the real-time, same-space launch event ensured a higher level of authenticity and students' sense of higher stakes.

These are all valuable experiences, however, not the kinds that could be achieved remotely.

The disadvantage of the online platform also became evident when final client presentations were prepared by online students, but the lack of real-time, same-place practice resulted in a less coordinated performance. Online students' *individual presentations* were equally well developed and delivered on-site to similar presentations given by on-ground students. However, the *team presentations* that included a mix of online students and on-ground students created the impression that independent students with independent approaches were given the same script and were assigned into one group just a few minutes before presentation. The audience saw prepared individuals, but did not get the sense that the presenters belonged to the same production team.

3 Natural Selection Online

The ease of tracking individual students' productivity in larger collaborative projects allows instructors to isolate and identify a student's strengths and weaknesses. The online platform may provide the opportunity for instructors to prevent, counteract, or improve such deficiencies in skills or abilities rapidly by addressing an individual student's needs via a direct connection with the student. The privacy of an online class may also allow instructors or advisors to help struggling students in the manner they find the most effective, based on the student's personality, learning style, and the assignment and course specifics. Online business leaning can provide a life-changing experience to students who don't thrive in the class environment due to their personality or less developed social skills. Sometimes it's the quiet students who have the best questions or comments, and in a virtual classroom, they tend to prefer the use of an audio-only connection, chat features, and discussion boards. By

focusing more on content and results, and less on personalities, the online platform may be the most democratic solution yet in practical project-based learning.

4 Conclusion: The Hybrid Approach

The many outcomes of business studies can be categorized into two broad groups: *knowledge + skill-based outcomes* and *experience-based outcomes*. Education in the twentieth century used to focus on the former – this worked just fine for most learners, as generally no experience was expected from fresh graduates on the first day on their new job. This was especially true for undergraduate students. In the past two decades, however, technology provided a new platform for conducting business: online businesses were born, and the business culture changed. Education's answer to this rapid change was the expansion of course content or curricula, and these changes in academia took place relatively fast as well. The problem was that only the course content changed, the approach was carried over from the previous millennium.

Thanks to new technologies and the competition between Internet providers, fast and affordable Internet access soon became a reality for learners in the Western Hemisphere – so it made sense to move entire courses online. This new trend was primarily fueled by institutions' desire to provide flexibility and convenience to students and educators while increasing operation efficiency and gaining access to a brand new market. It is important to acknowledge that online education recognized the new online business models of the real world and delivered the expected outcomes of the first group*: relevant knowledge + skill-based outcomes*. However, the changes that came from the widespread use of the Internet by businesses and consumers alike affected more than just online stores and net start-ups: by 2010, it became the way most companies hired, trained, and many even operated. This brought about an even more significant change: that of the business culture. While academia's focus was still on the delivery of new *information*, while striving to stay up to date, its *methods* were still grounded in what used to work well in the largely offline business culture of the 1990s; there was no synchronization between the changing *way* of business and the new platform in education. In other words, education was teaching current information with yesterday's methods. One of the high-impact consequences of the shift in business culture is the fact that today more and more businesses expect fresh graduates to have prior practical experience in a related field – and internships aren't even always enough to satisfy their expectations. Twenty years ago, employers' primarily focus was on fresh graduates' degrees and academic performance. A decade later employers started asking interviewees about their skills and relevant experiences obtained during their education. Today, interview questions are centered around extracurricular experience, and graduates have much increased chances of getting hired when they provide proof of such experience, along with professional references. This is where our second group of outcomes, the *experience-based learning outcomes* comes into play.

Developing the skills essential in real-life business, and running simulation scenarios while online students are gaining their experience in front of their home computers, isn't a new concept anymore, but it is still an imperfect, or rather, incomplete one. Currently, it is not the (actually, often existing but underutilized) technology that holds back students from gaining the practical experience that their future employers seek, rather the sluggish focus-shift from an information-centered to a practice-center approach in education. And while the online platform can enable students to do more than ever, it doesn't help to obtain the human connections and experiences that are still the engines of businesses today.

Taking all the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats into account, the conclusion can be drawn that online platforms can complement the on-ground business education extremely well and should be incorporated into today's business education. However, practical business learning cannot fully, without significant compromises, take place online. A hybrid approach that includes a series of both classroom and online sessions per course or a mix of on-ground and online courses in a curriculum may be the most effective and practical approaches today.

Course contents are traditionally centered around one subject area and may involve practical work. Educators are aware that adaptability is one of the most, if not the most, important skills for a graduate to develop due to the accelerated changes of our times, yet most traditional academic models favor teaching in a one- or two-dimensional context (i.e., one-way or two-way teacher-student communication), in a student's chosen core discipline, only accompanied by mandated general education classes. Online business learning can put students into both professional- and soft skill-building scenarios, as courses can be organized and taught by several specialized instructors in a shared schedule with more scheduling freedom and greater efficiency than in traditional on-site classes. However, in order for students to fully prepare for a professional career in business, a real-time, same-space component is essential to fill in the gaps in experiences that a well-rounded graduate in business should be armed with today.

"Soft-skills-driven, project-based, collaborative, and practical" is the future of education, and hybrid is the platform that will take us there.