

# Chapter 8

## Perspectives and Practice: Facilitating the Learning of the Twenty-First-Century Manager

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### Introduction

The twenty-first-century economic and business environments are intensifying the need for managers to both possess a wide range of skills and knowledge and to develop their capabilities to apply and continuously improve these. Set within the context of today's interconnected world, contemporary management requires international perspectives coupled with practical skills that support the development of interpersonal relationships and increasingly overlapping social and professional networks (Ettlinger 2003). This evolving environment requires management education to become more relevant to students who are managing the complexity and uncertainty of today's socioeconomic contexts. Consideration of *how* MBA students learn is influencing teaching practices as much as the focus on *what* they need to learn.

A recent curriculum redesign for the Open University Business School's Masters in Business Administration (MBA) presented an opportunity to reflect on teaching practices to help students make the connection between theory and practice and to prepare them with the skills needed to meet unpredictable twenty-first-century challenges. The MBA is offered in the Open University's 'supported open learning' model of distance learning (McAndrew and Weller 2005), which provides a mix of self-directed learning through OU-published and other course materials (online and offline) and face-to-face and online interaction with locally based Associate Lecturers (ALs) each having a group of about 15 module students. This approach allows the school to offer its learning opportunities at scale and worldwide, with 30,000-plus students based in 107 countries in 2009.

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Most of the MBA's students are working and employed in management roles. Similarly, in large part, OU MBA ALs are practitioners themselves, employed in a wide range of management and consultant positions in addition to their part-time roles with the OU. It is important to emphasise that the AL role is essentially one of facilitation of student learning – they are not there to 'lecture', and so the AL title is something of a misnomer. ALs have always played a crucial role in the facilitated learning journey of OU students and in ensuring critical engagement with ideas in the distance learning environment (Alexander 1998).

This chapter reports on one part of a larger case study of the module's redesign, which studied the changing nature of teaching in distance education – both in curriculum materials and in facilitating learning. This chapter first discusses the research questions and background to the case. It then outlines the theory providing the conceptual framework for the enquiry with a particular focus on the development of communities of practice and collaborative learning. This is followed by a brief discussion of the research methods used. The chapter then presents the results of the analysis, discusses the limitations of the research and suggests possible steps for further enquiry.

## Research Questions and Background of the Case

The guiding research questions for the case study were the following: 'What is the role of teaching?' and 'How can we improve the integration of practice-based learning?' as key to responding to criticisms that MBA qualifications are overly functionalistic (Latham et al. 2004) and do not meet the needs of practising managers (Leavitt 1989; Mintzberg and Gosling 2002; Pfeffer and Fong 2002; Mintzberg 2004). The current redesign of the MBA (and this module, specifically) was the product of faculty discussions regarding the importance of practice-based learning in management education. Practice-based learning approaches move beyond what Holmberg (1981, in Shearer 2003, p. 277) called a 'guided didactic conversation' used in traditional distance learning pedagogy. The student's context becomes a primary focus for learning: for the part-time MBA student, it is their work environment that provides the central focus. Therefore, learning is no longer simply a didactic conversation but is a facilitated dialogue between theory and practice.

The design of the content and facilitation strategy for the new module assumed a different set of dialogues that would be needed (Fenton-O'Creevy et al. 2006) – dialogues that might change the role of the design team (as conveyors of 'knowledge' and content) and the ALs (as facilitators of the learning process). The case study's researchers sought to understand the role of ALs in facilitating the learning process and to evaluate how professional development opportunities helped to build their skills in facilitating practice-based learning.

As part of this development process, a series of workshops were held on 'critical engagement'. Critical engagement refers to '[a] description...for a process of interacting with ideas in MBA modules in which students 'engage' their brains/

thinking with both course theory and their professional practice' (Cameron 2009, pp. 1–2). The workshops brought together 12 ALs to reflect on their pedagogical practices, assessment and module design in order to better support the 'critical engagement' of their MBA students (Cameron and Robinson 2008; Cameron 2009, 2010). One aspect of the workshops focused on the teaching practices specific to the stage 1 module, with particular attention paid to how learning might be facilitated for entry-level MBA students.

Development of the module began in earnest in 2009 for a module launch in November 2010, and a key challenge for the development team was to ensure that the lessons learned in the critical engagement workshops were incorporated into the new module's pedagogical approach. Resources were developed by ALs for their colleagues, which included a guide for ALs on critical engagement and its facilitation (Bunnell et al. 2009). Additionally, members of the AL community advised on the module's pedagogy, wrote guidance specific to facilitating learning on the module and participated in a 2-day AL briefing before the module started.

Of particular importance was the focus on facilitation of learning – how to step back and let the theory-practice dialogue emerge between the student and their practice settings. As part of ongoing support for ALs in this role, the module hosts an AL-moderated online forum where they can discuss any challenges and successes and ask for guidance from their colleagues and from the module's writers. Online forums have been an important part of the OU's AL support system for two decades. For example, Quintas and Fowle (2002) discussed their use in a then-new MBA module, *Managing Knowledge*, as an emerging community of practice. This use has since evolved school-wide into a more formal mechanism for providing such support. Although communities of practice are usually defined as informal and emergent, the support mechanisms for their development can be intentional (Wenger 1998/2007). Online AL forums (and indeed the forums for students) are designed to provide places for such emergence.

## Theoretical Framework for the Study

Lave and Wenger's (1991) ideas on the emerging communities of practice as means of disseminating and codifying knowledge are well established in the literature. Previous research on OU Business School courses has used the community of practice model as a way of managing knowledge amongst students and ALs (e.g. Quintas and Fowle 2002; Little et al. 2003). People in these emergent systems form common understandings of norms and meaning and develop resources to disseminate this developing knowledge and guide further social learning (Wenger 1998/2007). The communities of practice model focuses on the social and relational aspects of learning and the negotiation of meaning that thus evolves from these interactions.

However, Roberts' (2006) summary of various critiques of the model surfaces the issue of power and control and the concern that not all members of a community of practice will be able to (or feel able to) participate as fully as others. These issues,

in their turn, can influence the degree of trust amongst community members and the limits of innovation that can be engendered by the community. These are important criticisms that have particular relevance to the emergent community of practice discussed in this chapter.

The ALs facilitating the module are all academically qualified but come from a wide range of professional backgrounds, some with academic teaching experience, some without, some with greater knowledge of the different subject areas (e.g. finance and accounting) and some with greater experience of tutoring with the OU. For this reason, this diversity (in experience, in power, etc.) within the group provides a fruitful forum that not only exchanges and shares practices for the purposes of codifying knowledge and facilitating innovative practice but also allows for the critiques of practice that may not be expected to emerge from a typical ‘community of practice’ model. This is where collaborative learning can be a useful way of better understanding the group interactions.

Collaborative and other similar approaches to social learning pedagogies emerged from several different sources including problem-centred approaches, cooperative learning models, Harvard case study analysis and peer teaching (Smith and MacGregor 1992). Similar collaborative learning principles formed an important part of Vygotsky’s approach to cultural learning (1978), which was later expanded by Bruner (1985) in reference to peer support in problem-solving contexts.

However, it is Bruffee’s (1984) examination of Richard Rorty’s (1979 in Bruffee 1984) discussion of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal discourse’ that appreciates the diversity within an emergent ‘community of practice’. ‘Normal discourse’ is that which is governed by a set of negotiated norms for interaction (e.g. what is appropriate for discussion and how discussion should be made). Such discourse leads to a process of ‘socially justifying beliefs’:

We socially justify belief when we explain to others why one way of understanding how the world hangs together seems to us preferable to other ways of understanding it. We establish knowledge or justify belief collaboratively by challenging each other’s biases and presuppositions; by negotiating collectively toward new paradigms of perception, thought, feeling, and expression; and by joining larger, more experienced communities of knowledgeable peers through assenting to those communities’ interests, values, language, and paradigms of perception and thought. (Bruffee 1984, p. 646)

However, Bruffee argued that Rorty’s ‘abnormal discourse’ provided the potential to develop a conversation beyond the given norms – thus leading the way toward continued innovation and learning:

Abnormal discourse sniffs out stale, unproductive knowledge and challenges its authority, that is, the authority of the community which that knowledge constitutes. Its purpose, Rorty says, is to undermine “our reliance upon the knowledge we have gained” through normal discourse. We must occasionally undermine this reliance because normal discourse tends to “block the flow of conversation by presenting [itself] as offering the canonical vocabulary for discussion of a given topic” (1979, 386–387). (Bruffee 1984, p. 648)

Educators, Bruffee notes, must balance these two modes of learning – to ‘perform as conservators *and* agents of change’ (p. 650), and therefore educators must help students to develop – in their learning discourse – ways to conserve the knowledge

that has been gained and to critique it. In a similar way, the module's developers saw the AL's online forum as a way of encouraging both 'normal' discourse (to codify and share practice) and 'abnormal' discourse (to critique practice). It was hoped that in using the forum as a way to discuss and debate the innovative practices in the module (e.g. regarding how to facilitate the practice-based learning approaches) ALs would develop a shared understanding of the innovations and identify better practices (rather than 'best practices').

## Methods of Enquiry

Case studies are useful tools for educational practitioners as they build 'a picture to help inform our practice or to see unexplored details of a case' (Creswell 1998, p. 95). This study employs an intrinsic case study (Stake 1995), i.e. the specific situation is of interest in its own right to one of the leaders of distance and blended learning development. However, lessons can also be drawn for curriculum development in other contexts, including face-to-face environments and other institutions using practice-based learning pedagogies. The unit of analysis for this case was the network of stakeholders involved in or influenced by the module's development process with these stakeholders providing key data and information for the enquiry. These data included a small set of semi-structured interviews with four ALs in leadership roles as well as data from a day-long feedback event with a larger group of 13 ALs, two focus groups held with the module's writers and design team, the authors' longitudinal reflections on the development process (e.g. Reid and Robinson 2011) and feedback from students following the end of the first year of the module.

The interviewed ALs were asked to discuss their learning and development through facilitating learning on the module and through their participation in the AL-dedicated forum. Summaries of feedback from a larger group of ALs during the feedback event were used to provide further perspectives of the AL teaching experience during the first year of the module. These data were analysed using a simple thematic analysis, which focuses on 'identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behavior' (Aronson 1994, n.p.). The next section presents the analysis of these themes in the context of four pedagogical challenges in the module's design.

## Facilitating Learning on the Module

The module's redesign and AL development focused on four areas:

1. Practice-based learning
2. Information discernment

3. Skill building in reflective practice
4. The mix of collaborative and independent learning approaches

The perspectives of the ALs in their learning are discussed below in reference to these four areas.

### ***Practice-Based Learning and Reflective Practice***

Student engagement with the interaction of theory and practice is central to their work on a year-long practice-based learning project (the evidence-based initiative or EBI), which allows them to critically engage with ideas in their practice context. Formerly, the EBI was a feature of the capstone module of the MBA, only. However, it became clear that students would benefit from greater preparation to undertake the final module and to engage in a theory-practice dialogue much earlier in the programme (Cameron 2009). With the integration of an EBI at the start of the students' MBA studies – albeit in an less intensive fashion than in the capstone module – ALs need to facilitate learning in EBI-related skills in research. These skills include understanding the use and critical analysis of theory, building the skills of reflective practice and the critical review of evidence, as well as a foundation in business and management functions. Finding the right balance and interconnections between theory and practice can be challenging for both students and ALs.

The interviewed ALs and those in the feedback event considered the EBI to be the key part of the learning process for their students and the one that their students found the most challenging. One tutor called it the 'vehicle of the learning journey' and used his feedback on intervening assignments to help 'signpost' to the final EBI-related assignment. He saw his students' understanding coalescing toward the end of the module, when they submitted their final 'travel report' on their year-long set of EBI activities.

Centred on the students' practice, the EBI can present a number of operational challenges. For example, ALs found it challenging to address students' workplace issues – redundancy, changing priorities at work and new work roles – and how to help students to negotiate these transitions. The ALs shared suggestions in the forum leading to new ways to facilitate student learning such as pairing students and providing suggestions for alternative contexts in which to set the EBI. Yet ALs said that the greatest challenge they faced in understanding the EBI process was understanding the 'final destination' and that they only grasped this once they had worked through the first year of activities with their students. Even those who had facilitated EBI learning in the MBA capstone thought going through the process with their students was crucial to their understanding of the module's practice-based learning approach. An AL explained, 'My intention is now more directly to help students appreciate the range of ways in which concepts can be applied and how their relevance can be explored and evaluated when applied to different sets of circumstances.'

This involves asking more challenging questions and less provision of answers and suggestions'. In many ways, the ALs, themselves, undertook a year-long practice-based learning experience.

Where the challenge emerges is to ensure that students are developing an adequate understanding of management theory, the demonstration of which is crucial to successful assignments and success on the final examination. In reflection, the ALs found that their own teaching practice needed to be less didactic and more facilitative in order to encourage reflective practice in their students. Developing students into 'reflective practitioners' has been an important part of the OU's MBA since its creation, and the EBI dedicates a substantial part of the study time to students' reflective engagement with the material and their practice. Through this strong focus on the EBI, ALs were able to successfully encourage their students to go beyond mere memorisation of the theories and to reflect on how the ideas might influence their practice. One AL explained that because the module was new and used a different approach, he and his fellow ALs were more likely to think about their tutoring approach and style because what they had done previously was unlikely to fit the new module's pedagogy. However, more notable was that the AL forum provided a mechanism for ALs to reflect on their *own* practice by virtue of the sharing community that developed. An AL noted: '[N]ot only were questions answered that I had myself, fresh ideas brought in, but also questions and ideas brought up that I/we as ALs should think about'. While the module's writers posed and/or answered some of these questions, more generally they encouraged ALs to discuss these amongst themselves, and through this interaction, the ALs were given the space to reflect on their own practice by virtue of sharing their ideas with one another.

### ***Information Discernment***

Another key piece of learning for the ALs focused on how they developed and enhanced their students' information discernment. The module builds students' skills in digital literacy through a resource-rich, online learning context, which helps them to develop skills in how to access information and discern its validity and usefulness. Thus, ALs need to develop a mastery of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and its forums, as well as other online resources much more so than in past iterations of the MBA. Translating their facilitation role into an online setting requires ALs to be risk-takers and to have an explorer mentality (Cox et al. 2000), and they need to recognise the subtle balance needed between content instruction and the learning process (Cameron 2009).

The module's writers expected the AL forum to play an important part in their coming to grips with the online tools and resources used in the module. In some ways, it did facilitate this process, and ALs shared different tools with one another (such as video conferencing approaches). However, AL learning about the tools became integrated into learning about the pedagogy as a whole. For example, one

debate in the AL forum emerged from some tutors forwarding concerns from students that they needed to find resources themselves instead of having them provided to them. Some tutors thought it best to provide the materials, while others believed it is best for the students to learn these digital literacy skills early on.

The students' journey is structured so that as the module progresses, students are offered fewer specific instructions for finding information on a particular topic (e.g. how to use the online library system), and a broader remit emerges for identifying sources and information on their own, including bringing into their forum conversation information from their own work contexts. Thus, ALs had to manage student learning away from a more traditional theory-driven approach to one that incorporated learning in many different contexts. One AL noted how she encouraged her students to critically engage in a deeper understanding of the material:

I have tried to emphasise that more holistic approach in the way I approach the material and respond to and support my student group in terms of their questions about content and the skills being developed. I have taken from this a view that my role should be much more actively challenging of students to understand the relevance of ideas presented in [the module] in relation to the practical issues in their own organisations and their long-term development as managers. This shifts the focus on to a deeper understanding of 'why' rather than a more superficial learning of isolated content or a series of theoretical ideas (i.e. the 'what').

This experience echoes some of the findings from the critical engagement workshops, in which one participating AL had noted 'a change from being accustomed to defending course materials from attacks by sceptical students to encouraging scepticism and debate and the testing of theory in working practice to gather evidence of real usefulness or inapplicability' (Cameron 2009, p. 15). A module AL explained, 'I am aware that [a more challenging stance] should ideally be progressive over the course of the whole module – moving from a higher level of direction and guidance from me at the outset to an increasingly facilitative and collaborative approach as it continues'.

Interestingly, while AL feedback did emphasise their forum as an important and useful tool for sharing best practices and advice, they did not identify it as important for building a better understanding of the VLE. They saw their role as facilitating and understanding of the module's underlying philosophy rather than as a guide to how to navigate its pages, which echoes the more general finding that the AL forum provided less 'how to' instruction and more dialogue about the reasons for using a particular approach.

### ***Collaborative and Independent Learning***

A large number of ALs for the MBA stage 1 module are familiar with Lave and Wenger's 'communities of practice' model (1991) and are therefore already aware of the ways that the forums can be used for discussion and collaborative learning. One AL described how the student forum they facilitated was moving toward this model: '[I]t can go beyond being a Q&A forum (where students find the info and



guidance they need) to really being a two-way street of learning from each other (closer to a true CoP)'.

Such collaborative learning is explicitly built into the pedagogy of the module – and at least two assignments require students to incorporate others' perspectives in how they discuss their own views on a topic. Students are encouraged to see that they already have expertise on which they can draw to develop a deeper understanding of theories and ideas they are learning. This is a different approach to that which many of the experienced ALs have come across on former MBA modules.

The module provides both formal and informal opportunities for students to learn from one another, which are integrated into the learning journey and which allow students to develop their social networks and benefit from collaborative learning at a distance. Simultaneously, the learning materials and learning journey encourage students to develop independent learning skills. ALs must therefore develop their own skills in facilitating collaborative learning through asynchronous forums and synchronous video conferencing at the same time as renewing their facilitation skills. This balance can be difficult to attain, particularly on a programme's opening module when students often want more guidance.

ALs mentioned the importance of dialogue and discussion to enhance student learning and how crucial it was to develop this group cohesion early on. One AL recalled how one of her students asked for guidance on how she could gather information on her organisation's customers when she had no direct contact with them. The AL explained that her first reaction would have been to give the answer, but she had decided to hold off in order to allow a discussion of this issue to develop on the student forum. The AL reflected that, in the end, through the ensuing discussion, both she and her student had 'thought more deeply' and learned more about the topic than would have occurred by giving a simple answer.

ALs have gained a better understanding of their facilitative role – as one AL put it: 'It is okay for there to be periods for the [student forum] to be (more) quiet, to allow for it to happen, to let forum participants take the lead. To let the forum manage itself with minimal intervention is not a sign of laziness but actually can be what is desired'. Another AL described a similar approach emerging for his facilitation of the forum: 'My intention is now more directly to help students appreciate the range of ways in which concepts can be applied and how their relevance can be explored and evaluated when applied to different sets of circumstances. This involves asking more challenging questions and less provision of answers and suggestions'. This echoes prior research of an undergraduate practice-based learning module, where ALs distinguished this pedagogical practice as 'hands off vs. hands on' (Reid et al. 2010) relating to forum facilitation often requiring a 'hands off' or 'light touch' approach to stimulate learning.

In many ways, the module's writers intended the AL forum to serve as an example of this balanced approach to forum facilitation. In the hope of developing a community of practice – and one in which ALs could challenge prevailing practice – the forum was facilitated with a higher presence of the module's writers than in earlier AL module forums but with greater encouragement of dialogue, discussion and debate. This process was challenging at times, particularly in identifying how best

to respond to AL queries. Yet the ALs mentioned how invaluable the forum was in developing their teaching approach and how learning from their colleagues improved their practice.

## **Contribution, Limitations and Next Steps**

This chapter reports on a subset of a larger case study focused on the creation of an innovative learning design for a new MBA module, which underscores the challenges associated with implementing innovative pedagogies, particularly within an online setting. The data suggest that a developing community of practice aided in the implementation of the module and that through encouraging dialogue and the development of an AL community of practice, ALs experienced their own practice-based learning.

This chapter provides an important contribution in thinking about how dialogue plays a crucial and multidirectional role in how pedagogical innovation takes place. Distance learning universities, such as the OU, which offer programmes at scale, face the challenge of consistency when implementing innovative pedagogies, and dialogues within emergent communities of practice allow members to discuss, debate and challenge perceptions and develop more robust teaching practices. This highlights the importance of a ‘community of practice’ or ‘collaborative learning’ setting for revealing where inconsistencies arise, particularly when modules are presented to scale and at a distance. With an understanding that the first presentation of the module would reveal these challenges, the AL forum became a place for developing a mutual understanding of what certain activities and assignments meant – not just as envisioned by the module’s academic writers, but also by those who were actively facilitating it.

There were striking similarities between the experiences of students and those of their ALs who facilitate their learning. Interactions amongst ALs mirrored the experiences they noted with their own students – using dialogue to develop their understanding of the module, its pedagogy and learning journey. Through encouragement of both ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ discourse in the AL forum, ALs were given space to identify and discuss better practices for facilitating their students’ learning.

However, despite the active community that evolved in the AL forum, there was still a number of ALs who did not participate in forum discussions or feedback on their first year’s experiences. Some ALs mentioned privately that they did not do so because they felt there was too much debate from the ‘loud voices’, while others just preferred to get on with their teaching without engaging in the pedagogical debates. This ‘silence’ forms an important limitation of the data for the case study and points to the need for further enquiry into the role of ‘silence’ in online forums and uncovering whether the ‘voices’ of those who read posts but do not participate are related to what Lave and Wenger (1991) might call ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ or are, instead, related to Roberts’ (2006) disempowerment and disenfranchisement from the community of practice.

Secondly, the AL forum can be a lively place for debate, and different points of view were encouraged by the module team to stimulate learning and to empower ALs in the module development process. For some ALs, this ‘having a say’ in shaping the module is an important part of implementing innovative approaches. However, the process can also be unwieldy, and some ALs may have felt disempowered rather than empowered to share their perspectives. Further research is needed into identifying the best ways to incorporate these discussions into module development and improvement mechanisms to take account of emergent ‘abnormal discourse’. Further research and evaluation is needed to understand how to best involve ALs in the module development process and to provide more development opportunities that engage and empower them in support of pedagogical innovation.

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