

Case Study Research Paper
Leveraging Real, Integrated Project-based MBA Design to Foster Teamwork
and Management Behavioral Skills: A Moroccan Case

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Abstract

Those who advocate integrative thinking and behavioral skills in business management has urged the creation of a new competency and project-based MBA that promotes learners' behavior transformation and connection to industry. The purpose of this case study was to explore the use of experiential MBA program design at Université Internationale de Casablanca (UIC), a private for-profit university, to promote MBA graduates' career advancement, foster behavioral transformation, and enhance the quality of leadership in Moroccan business management. The experiential and project-based learning (PBL) frameworks served as the theoretical foundations of this research project. The research questions addressed the effectiveness of experiential learning design initiatives in the enhancement of MBA graduates' organizational behavior and quality of job delivery on the work place. Seventy individual reflection interviews were collected, and hand analyzed for the discovery of themes. Results showed that the design of a generalist integrated project-based MBA ensured a sustainable transformation of graduates' managerial behavior leading to their career advancement and personal satisfaction. Intentions of this research are to improve the instruction and curriculum design and practice of learning in higher education. Implication for social positive change included the use of experiential learning to foster sustainable performance among graduates in a Moroccan economy in need of accelerated growth.

Keywords: Curriculum design; Project-based MBA; experiential education; MBA in Morocco; transformative education; instructional design; behavioral skills; MBA effectiveness; teamwork.

Introduction

Engaging business with experiential and transformative learning in management education in general and the MBA in particular has been recommended in recent literature (Audet & Marcotte, 2017; Barber, 2018; Callega, 2014; Dirkx, Espinoza & Schlegel, 2018; Hay & Hodgkison, 2007; Hoover, Giambatista, Sorenson & Bommer, 2010; Kelliher, 2014; Khan & Ahmed, 2018; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Laud & Johnson, 2013; Mezirow, 1991; Nash, Hill & Anthony, 2017; O'Brien & Brown, 2017; Rienties & Héliot, 2018; Rubens, Schoenfeld, Schaffer, & Leah, 2018; Tagg, 2018; Warhurst, 2011). Traditional MBA curriculum has been exposed to severe criticism because of its narrow focus on functional knowledge and disconnection with real industry and failure to resolve challenges related to interdisciplinarity, students' engagement, connection to industry, and behavioral skills transformation (Navarro, 2008; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). However, scholars have documented reforming efforts on MBA curriculum design to foster positive behavioral transformation, reflexive learning, and linkage to business areas, including experiences in U.S. and U.K. (Baruch, 2009; Hay, 2006; Hay & Hodgkison 2007; Anderson, Paul, Katy & Rivers, 2018; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013; Stoten, 2018).

Employers over the world confirmed the value added that MBA graduates bring in to the business and their contribution to maintain a sustainable economic development. According to a research report conducted by the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC) 86% of employers having participated in the survey confirmed their desire to hire MBA graduates by the end of 2017, up from 79 % in 2016. Employers claim that MBA graduates have soft skills attributes that include among others, teamwork, communication, and creativity and recommend that universities use experiential learning in their curriculum design (GMAC, 2014, 2017). These competencies as well as the relevant learning methodologies to activate them will continue challenging academic designers to prepare graduates for the unknown jobs of the future in an uncertain environment (Barber, 2018; Rubens et al., 2018; WEF, 2016).

In Morocco, the challenges are bigger. The Moroccan economy counts on its *accelerating industrial plan 2014-2020* to increase the diversification of its economy and create more jobs opportunities (Minister of Industry, Investment, Trade and Digital Economy, 2014). However, while the small and business enterprise (SME) is recognized to be the driver of economic growth worldwide, experts viewed it to be the weakest link in the Moroccan economic value chain (L'Economiste, 2018). However, while higher education authorities in Morocco addressed the same globalized criticism to management education because of its mismatch with the employers' demands, research about leadership style in Moroccan firms showed that 58% of responding managers claimed a supportive leadership style that promotes participative management, active listening and communication (Bensalem, 2015).

According to a business research conducted by UIC aimed at exploring the potential of MBA growth in Morocco, recruiters reported that soft and management behavioral skills are key factors in the final decision for an MBA graduate candidate to get hired to an executive job. The

same study revealed that when they choose their MBA program, candidates focus on the quality of learning experience and return on investment in terms of career advancement rather than on the MBA ranking or credentials (Personal Communication, June, 2016).

The purpose of this case study is to explore the effectiveness of real integrated project-based MBA design in a Moroccan university setting and attempt to position the concept within the societal, and managerial development context of Moroccan business. Research about higher education in general and the MBA in particular is still to be encouraged in Morocco. Because the MBA has been associated with the U.S. and the neoliberal market, this research project will add a cultural perspective to MBA literature and enhance learning practice in executive business education and adult learning in Morocco. My literature review reported substantial work devised to enhance the relevance of MBA programs. However, most of these curriculum reforming efforts were limited to describing and criticizing MBA designs from a knowledge and content perspective while little has been done to suggest instructional designs offering practical alternatives linking management education to management performance; in other words, research about MBAs has been always concerned with *what* to teach instead of *how* to teach. Despite management education's deep concern about behavioral competencies, it has so far focused on implementing separate organizational behavior courses, never suggesting a whole integrated competency-based approach to the MBA curriculum. This article shows that it is possible to design a whole project-based MBA that leverages experiential learning at different stages of the learning process in the Moroccan context of a new executive MBA.

The author, designer and director of this MBA has been teaching and developing education program for many years. He had to dare to think out of the box of top-ranking challenging traditional MBAs to design a real *transformative MBA* for which evidence proved to be effective and efficient. This MBA promoted transformative experiential learning to foster collaboration, entrepreneurial mindset and engagement among graduates in a Moroccan economy in need of accelerated transformation and growth.

Literature Review

Why considering Experiential learning for MBA

There is a consensus among scholars that experiential learning theory (ELT), transformative, and PBL present the appropriate conceptual frameworks for designing a *truly transformative MBA* (Audet & Marcotte, 2017; Barber, 2018; Callega, 2014; Dirkx et al., 2018; Hay & Hodgkison, 2007; Hoover et al., 2010; Kelliher, 2014; Khan & Ahmed, 2018; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005, 2009; Laud & Johnson, 2013; Mezirow, 1991; Nash et al., 2017; O'Brien & Brown., 2017; Rienties & Héliot, 2018; Rubens et al., 2018; Tagg, 2018; Warhusrst, 2011). ELT draws on the constructivist framework developed by John Dewey and Kurt Lewin. ELT believes that learners are responsible for their learning because they are the main actors who create knowledge within an experiential learning environment that supports reflection and action (Kolb, 1984; Lockhart, 2013).

In a rapidly changing business environment, where technology is transforming the modes of work and production, the learning outcomes of business curriculum might be outdated soon. Therefore, the ELT could be used as the appropriate learning framework because it associates learning to a process of transforming and creating knowledge not to fixed outcomes. According to Barber (2018), the alternative is not “about trying to second guess the precise skills needed in five or ten years’ time, but rather it is about developing graduates with the cognitive abilities to innovate and handle whatever challenges arise. It is about being truly transformative” (p. 48). Kolb (1984) presents this experiential process in a cycle where the learner responds to an experience, reflects, thinks, and acts in a non-linear recursive fashion. Scholars recognize the agency of the learner over the process of learning that shapes her choices in terms of personal development and career advancement as implied by Kolb (1984) and Lockhart (2013).

Kolb and Kolb (2005) stated that learners need *learning spaces* or what we refer to here as *experiential labs* “to express and test in action what they have learned” (Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 208) and cultivate positive energy and engagement to attain behavioral transformation. Ma, Lai, Williams, Prejean, & Ford, (2008) used the concept of pedagogical laboratory as an effective space for exploring the effectiveness of field experience programs in shaping the teachers’ behavior in class. The model pedagogical laboratory relies on the following components: experience, reflection, and support, to activate learning. Therefore, experiential learning applied to an MBA curriculum is transformative and conducive to graduates’ personal and career development (Kolb, 1984).

Transformative learning builds on the theory of Jack Mezirow (1991) who emphasized the central role of experience in the process of learning that leads to a graduate’s personal transformation (Collega, 2014). Accordingly, when confronted with a problematic issue, learners first get disoriented, engage in critical self-reflection, and then redirect their behavior based on new adopted perspectives and knowledge. However, some scholars believe that people do not inevitably change their behavior from experience (Rae, 2010). Managerial behavior encompasses more than the hard and declarative theoretical knowledge because changing behavioral skills engages learners

in a continuous process of doing, understanding, sensing, and reflecting on their actions (Rae & Carswell, 2000). Designing experiential activities alone does not guarantee behavioral skill learning. Dewey, as cited by Kolb and Kolb (2005) stated that negative experiences having the potential to destroy the learners' opportunities of positive social growth should be deleted. Therefore, learning does not take place until learners decide to reflect on their actions on and off campus (Boyatzis, Cowen & Kolb as cited in Hoover et al., 2010).

Hoover et al. (2010), developed a comprehensive experiential learning model based on what they called "the Whole Person Learning" (WPL). The WPL is a pedagogical concept grounded in the ELT that aims to develop the three dimensions of the person: cognition, emotion and behavior. They stated that, for experiential learning to lead to observable managerial skills, learning should be self-directional and engage personal responsibility. They suggest that students should be given the opportunity to choose the course or project content that support their professional needs and write reflection journals to self-evaluate their learning. In the same direction, Rubens et al. (2017) argues that the transformation of management behavioral skills requires students' reflection on their own personal *identities* and calls on management education to address these issues using an experiential pedagogy that integrates functional knowledge with "fundamental values and emotions" (p. 3). So, graduates' reflections about their learning process and performance at work are a key source of information for evaluating the effectiveness of learning. However, we consider that Hoover et al. (2010) overemphasized the role of individuals in the processing of learning, neglecting the role of teamwork experience in the shaping of her executive skills.

Scholars have emphasized the importance of team work and communication in the process of behavioral transformation (Wyss-Flamm as cited in Kolb and Kolb, 2005). Kolb and Kolb (2005) considered teamwork as a conversational learning space for enhanced experiential learning. The team has been identified as the accelerator for behavioral change because of the emotional support provided during individuals' exchanges about their dilemmas and different interpretations to their personal situations. This is what Kolb and Kolb refer to as "cheers/jeers experiential continuum" where learners should be given enough time to act and reflect, feel and think, and express and test their learning. However, we consider that the authors referred to an ideal picture of what they called "good conversation", not referring to the tensions and conflicts that arise during the process of teamwork ranging from the phase of constitution to norming phase, which should be considered as a key part of the students' behavioral learning process. Research stated that any change agenda in this direction will not be easy to undertake and require a long time (Tagg, 2018)

Warhust (2011), argues for a relational definition of management practice. According to him, management practice is being humanized as a form of *identity* that shapes different kinds of interpersonal relationships managers have with people at work. Rienties and Hélot (2018), Hazen and Higby (2005) emphasized the role of team work in developing managers' integrative and interdisciplinary skills. They define teams as a social network where individuals belonging to different professional and disciplinary background create relationships conducive to

interdisciplinary and integrative problem-based thinking, student satisfaction, and project performance. While we concur with Hoover et al. (2010) and Rubens et al. (2017) that behavioral and psychological aspects were overlooked in traditional pedagogy, we argue that a program that aims to integrate behavioral skills with professional decision-making should use PBL to supplement skill development with business knowledge through the entire MBA process (Hay, 2007).

Project based MBA design

Scholars emphasized the advantages of using PBL as an innovative experiential environment or what we refer to as *experiential lab* to foster individual and collective learning (Audet & Marcotte, 2017; Efstratia, 2014; O'Brien & Brown, 2017; Khan & Ahmed, 2018; Sampietro & Rodriguez, 2017; Haryana, 2016; Laport, Francisco, Depena, Adriana et al., 2018). Citing DeFilippi, Audet & Marcotte, (2015) defined PBL as “students engaged in a project of limited duration, that includes goal-directed activities that are negotiated with a client or sponsor that generate both externally validated performance outcomes and individual and collective learning” (p. 3). PBL results from the interaction between prescriptive business knowledge and action learning and allows learners to integrate functional, operational and other relevant multidisciplinary business areas. The projects may cover functional area ranging from strategy, operations, marketing, finance, to information technology and projects ensure integration among disciplines.

On top of integrating the business discipline, students benefit from a unique social and emotional environment they have created themselves wherein they benefit from confronting their identities, interacting with peers, exchanging experiences, and learning how to work as a performing team (Hazen & Higby, 2005; Audet & Marcotte, 2018). PBL is designed to promote the culture of students' success because it transfers to them the ownership of solutions they might have found to real challenging business issues using executive skills of critical thinking, teamwork, innovation and creativity, and project management (Kulmala, Luimula, & Roslof, 2014). Kulmala et al. (2014) confirmed the innovative and experiential characteristics of capstone projects because “it stimulates real-world processes and, thus, supports collaboration between education and working life. Projects strengthen student's self-direction, intentional and active learning skills” (p. 3). Knapp (2010) and Ohlsson (as cited in Audet & Marcotte, 2017), emphasized the role of team work in shaping social interactions and interrelationship skills when sharing points of views and learning from each other.

While PBL has been championed in the literature, business schools do not embrace project management course as core teaching in their curriculum. Professors Rodriguez and Sampietro (2017) conducted research on the 200 top business schools worldwide and revealed that only 4% of these institutions offer project-based management as part of their MBA core curriculum. They argue that companies demand for talented MBA graduates capable of not only executing operations but managing complex projects that require executive skills to maintain competitiveness and business growth.

As an innovative learning initiative, we argue, in line with Anderson et al. (2017) that a project-based approach, grounded in experiential learning could be considered as an “adaptive and reflexive approach to support resilience and agility” in time of actual environmental turbulence (p. 431). The authors suggested a learning model called *Framework for Reflexive learning in Turbulent times*, wherein learners engage collaboratively in a problem-solving design approach to find creative and innovative solutions to complex business issues. Therefore, I argue that PBL is the ideal learning scenario in Moroccan business context where managers are challenged to become reflexive and not conformist managers.

However, these innovative design strategies are not to be implemented without difficulties. Dempster, Benfield, and Francis (2012) pointed to the challenges created by the integration of innovative pedagogies in the curriculum design practice. These include “inflexibility, lack of regular updating, absence of stakeholder input into designs, difficulty visualizing the learning experience and little sharing of curriculum ideas or collaborative design” (p. 136). In the same direction Audet and Marcotte (2017) stated that implementing these innovative teaching methods challenged the conventional instructor’s teaching role and is time consuming, claiming that “their value must be recognized by university authorities, and those who champion these projects and shoulder their weight must be supported and rewarded” (p. 12).

From Active to reflexive learning

Reflection confirms the agency of individuals and teams over learning. Experience alone does not suffice to transform the behavior until learners reflect on their own actions, questioning their assumptions about the reality of their managerial practice (Stewart et al., 2008). Through critical reflection, learning is recognized as “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action” (Mezirow, 1991, p.1). In a so turbulent and changing business environment, learning should outpace the target of responding to the actual employers’ needs and build the capacity of managers to be creative and adaptive in this uncertain world (Anderson and al., 2017; Dover, Sharm and Munn, 2018). In support of this argument, Anderson et al. (2017) considered learning as an *evolving resource* (p. 432). They stated that reflexive learning, which is grounded in an experiential framework, will allow learners to “develop the skills of judgment and resilience that allow knowledge to be reconfigured, reframed, and reconceptualized” (p. 432). This could be the ideal scenario for executive MBA candidates wherein they should engage with knowledge and experience in a reflexive way that would enable them manage effectiveness in a complex and ambiguous business environment. Therefore, universities should engage in academic transformational process to develop experiential MBA designs that foster reflexive learning enabling learners “to deal with uncertainty and complexity, to think creatively and become critically reflexive managers” following the guidance of Anderson et al. (2017, p. 434). Furthermore, this kind of instructional MBA design should facilitate peer instruction and deep learning by “encouraging action-reflection among and across all contributors – students, tutors, work colleagues

and program managers” (Kelliher, p. 1279). This *transformative* MBA leverages *reflexive learning* as mainstream pedagogy that creates the experiential environment where “active expression and testing are continuously involved in the learning process” (Kolb & Kolb, p. 208). Therefore, the transformation of the management behavioral skills is a function of the learner and the experiential learning environment.

Research Design

Method, Participants, Data Analysis

The constructivist background of this research informed this qualitative study; because interpretive research assumed that the reality of learning is contextually and socially constructed, I constructed knowledge through the process of collecting and analyzing data following the direction of Merriam (2009). I used the qualitative research methodology as described by Creswell (2012) to discover and understand the learning experience of experiential education from the perspectives of an MBA graduate at UIC and employers. I was interested in gaining insight into how MBA graduates reflect on their learning from the perspective of an experiential MBA designed on a project-based approach through the full educational process.

The case study approach was used for the study because it provided an in-depth exploration of participants’ experiences within the unique bounded system of the MBA program offered at UIC following the direction of Bogdan and Biklen (2007); Darke, Sharke and Broaden (1998). The case study was instrumental because the underlying objective of the study overtakes the UIC context to understand the reflections of participants about the process of experiential project-based MBA learning and contribute to the improvement of educational practices at Moroccan universities in general. The resulting knowledge was more concrete and contextual because it provided real-life experiences within the Moroccan sociocultural organizational context.

This paper aims to answer the overarching question, “How could MBA curriculum best enhance the development of managerial behavioral skills?” The following subsequent research questions guided the study:

1. How have graduates lived their MBA learning experiences?
2. What have graduates learned and how has it impacted their behavioral skills and career?

The knowledge constructed out of this paper is enriched by findings from secondary data, interviews with HR managers in Morocco, and feedback from a leading international client company in the country.

Beginning in 2012, the director of the MBA program introduced an open-ended self-reflection questionnaire at the end of the program. The director requires students to complete this self-assessment, considered to be critical in the experiential learning process, offering their confidential perspectives about the core professional project-based experience. Graduates were asked to react on their earning experiences in teams, describe the personal benefits they had taken from it, provide examples of how MBA learning impacted their jobs and career, and cite challenges they had faced during learning sessions. While respondents answered using the French language, the author translated the text into English in order to inform the principal emerging themes. The results compiled in this article represent nine cohorts from 2013 until 2018 including two in-house cohorts of a leading local international company operating in new technologies. A purposeful sample of 70 reflection interviews was collected and analyzed to inform knowledge about the phenomena under investigations with overall gender distribution of 70% male and 30% female. The group averaged 10 years professional experience, which reflects their strong awareness about their professional and personal development expectations.

UIC's MBA instructional Design

As a new for-profit accredited and recognized university by the state, the "Université Internationale de Casablanca" – UIC, is facing similar challenges as those that prevail in the higher education industry. Competition is keen, technology is transforming the learning delivery mode and higher education governance is becoming global (Martines & Wolverson, 2009). Corporate recruiters throughout the world expressed demand for a category of leaders with interpersonal and integrative thinking skills, which is pressing academic leaders to reconsider their strategies to promote effective learning.

Engaging Moroccan business requires considering executive MBA candidates not only as non-traditional students but as business partners on campus. Engaging them in a learning experience in class means simulating and relocating parts of their real businesses on-campus. By doing this, the university "...builds a professional class of managers who would be socialized into a profession rooted in a socially productive contract between work organization and [the university where they learn]" (Rubin & Diedorff, 2013, p. 133). To meet the above external challenges, I had to design in 2011, one year after UIC's establishment, a professional MBA program that should appeal to a demanding working population in terms of learning quality. The major result was the development of an innovative project-based MBA grounded in the Kolb's experiential framework. The MBA program's goals aligned the mission of the university to develop the highly professional and skilled workforce that the corporate sector demands. The MBA instructional design focused on the development of executive and interpersonal skills and the changes in the mindset and attitudes of the students. UIC MBA is part-time executive program, and courses are delivered in a unique one-seminar-at-a-time calendar during weekends, instead of the traditional calendar. The duration of the degree completion is around 18 months.

The executive MBA program was established through five integrative core managerial competencies that cross cover the different domains of business and operations in the organization. Each integrative core knowledge unit with its respective courses, is recognized to match real-world organizational structure: IT and Organization, Marketing and Finance, Operation and HR, Ethics and Strategy, and International Management. These core course units provide the interdisciplinary context that might be used for further integrative dialogue among students confirming that “the traditional silos of the business disciplines, while providing focus for study and research, are artificial when perceived from the perspective of suppliers, employees, and customers” (Hazen & Higby, p. 408).

To incarnate this integrative dialogue, I have incorporated a PBL initiative wherein small groups of 4 to 5 working students would realize and publicly present a portfolio of five professional projects that relate to real corporate issues, each project deriving from the respective core unit. When students complete the core courses, they engage in *experiential labs* where they engage in activities “surrounding gathering and interpreting information to arrive at a particular [decision]” (Rubin & Dierdorff, p. 218). Central to these labs is Kolb’s four-stage educational model for effective learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Each group of learners chooses a real business issue to resolve (Concrete experience); must design a problem-solving research plan that draws on their integrative core courses (reflective observation); use concepts and models to analyze data (abstract conceptualization); and finally, present solutions and recommendation to resolve the issue (active experimentation). In the case of in-house MBA, the final capstone projects are customized to answer the business, technological, and operational challenges of the company for which the program has been tailored. Figure 1 illustrates the core integrative modules of the MBA with the corresponding experiential labs and integrative projects. The curriculum design embedded within Tuckman’s (1965) team development curve is seen to focus on the teamwork experience as a social context wherein graduates would develop people-centered competencies through the MBA process.

The instructor, behaving as a facilitator and consultant, allocates 5 to 6 weeks for the finalization of the project until oral presentation. Then student groups are afforded two extra weeks to submit their well analyzed and well-argued based consulting deliverables that provide evidence of students’ managing the right industry’s related issues and integrating the relevant core functional courses. From the perspective of consulting firms “...three weeks in practice can duplicate two years in business school” (Laud and Johnson, 2013, P.25). Figure 2 illustrates the kind of issues resolved in each experiential lab.

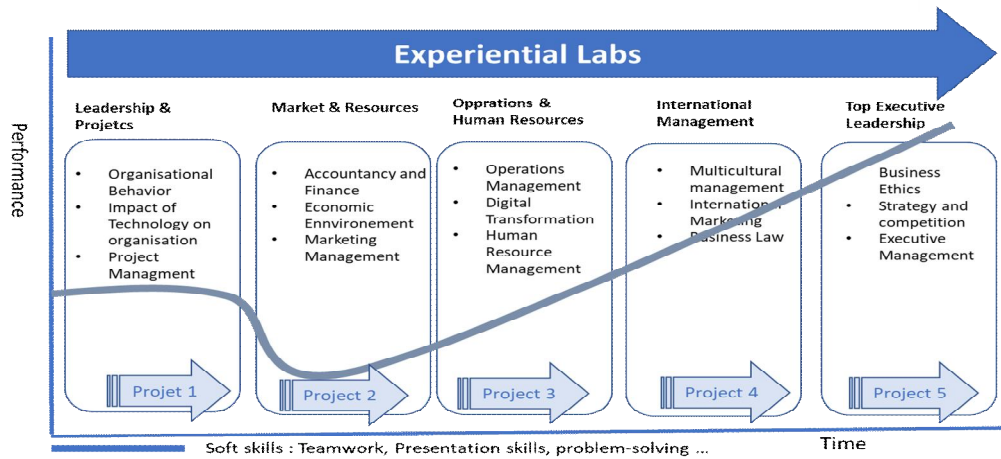


Figure 1. Project Based MBA curriculum design embedded in a Tuckman's model of team development.

Each project is executed through twenty face-to-face hours delivered in a workshop format during weekends. These sessions may include peer-instruction, students' presentations, and the instructors' challenging personal coaching of students on team and self-development issues. Formative assessment is used as a strategy to evaluate the advancement of students' groups through the project stages. For each core course unit, projects are graded 40% and courses 60%. Details about the assessment rubric and the project management checklist are discussed by the instructor at the beginning of the project. These experiential learning *labs* or *learning spaces* will enable participants to develop people-centered skills of leadership including teamwork, integrated reasoning and oral communication (Kolb & Kolb 2005; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013).

Labs of experience and leadership	Integrated projects in teams
Experiential Lab 1	Groups working on real organizational transformation project driven by information technology
Experiential Lab 2	Teams launching a new service or product on the local market
Experiential Lab 3	Team improving one or more processes to improve quality, efficiency and efficacy
Experiential Lab 4	As Managing Directors, teams take over a business in difficulty and provide a successful strategic repositioning (Business game)
Experiential Lab 5	Teams could either draw on the project of Lab 2 or work on a new international strategy to standardize or adapt their business.

Figure 2. Experiential labs with corresponding required capstone projects

Because PBL is central to the MBA and processed on a long-time horizon, a choice has been made with respect to the method of groups' members allocation. Members are randomized in groups that are compelled to stay together until the end of the program. Because people do not have the opportunity to choose the individuals they work with, they are forced to work together and

establish new interdisciplinary relationships that may challenge their assumptions and real-life perspectives (Renties & Héliot, 2018). However, we believe that Renties and Héliot focused on interdisciplinarity and overlooked the psychological aspects that should have conditioned the process of the team building from creation to the stage of cohesion and trust. This is because performing teams cannot be created at a stroke, and, they need to be coached effectively to foster successful teamwork and team performance, which is recognized to be a long, challenging and time-consuming human learning process (Tagg, 2018). This process might be exemplified by the team development stages as described by Tuckman (1965) with the four phases of Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing. The multitude of projects realized by every group of students over the entire 18 months of the MBA duration allows them to assess their respective teamwork learning capabilities at every team development stage and “develop trust with their peers, which facilitates the sharing of experience” (Audet & Marcotte, 2018, p. 11).

Drawing on the research of scholars, (Hoover et al., (2010) & Warhurst (2011), Dirkx et al., 2018) we argue that learners use project learning space to confront their identities, self-understand each other, and engage a transformative learning process. The program takes off with the course of organizational behavior because it is all about transforming the behavior of learners in this MBA. Then, students follow up by taking the project management course that aims to provide them with tools likely to help them handle their PBL successfully.

Aware that “transformation of [a behavior] needs to come from within learners themselves” (Collega, 2010), I use, during the organizational behavior course, the Mesirow concept of *disorienting dilemma* to intentionally ask every individual student the following question, “what is the most important resource in the organization?” The majority, if not the totality of students, refers to *human resource* as the answer. Considering this answer as inappropriate, the instructor intervenes to redirects attention toward her *identity* prompting *her* to reflect on *herself* and engage in a behavioral transformation process of the MBA. This is because when individuals change, their respective managerial environments around them will automatically change (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Therefore, to help students know their *identities* better, we offer them the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Boyatzis and Kolb, 1995). The use of these instruments in the developmental process of the team emphasizes the psychological dimensions so far underrepresented in conventional MBA curriculums.

At the end of this first course, each group of students should submit a written team contract that indicates the students’ personal names, the team logo, learning objectives, the norms, and procedures to resolve interpersonal conflicts. We anticipated that the resulting projects coming out of these core *experiential labs* initiative will enable graduates to resolve real-world business issues and master people-centered competencies. After ten cohorts and experiential labs in practice, we seek to validate our assumptions that management behavioral transformation is possible through this experiential transformative instructional design.

Research Findings

The results of the study revealed that for most graduates, the MBA program was highly beneficial to their career advancement and contributed to transforming their management behavioral skills supporting their performance on job settings. The knowledge derived out of data revealed two themes: teamwork experience and behavioral transformation leading to career advancement.

Teamwork Experience

Under this theme, all participants agreed that teamwork experience in the MBA has enriched their learning and shaped new contours of their personality. Manager-graduate A stated that, “my team experience was very interesting; it has been among the best and marking experiences in my life.” In the same direction, manager-graduate D confirmed that working in teams “was an enriching experience which has been by far different from those I had in my professional or academic backgrounds.” Data analysis revealed that teamwork is a challenging process that has gone through iterative stages allowing different learning loops. This resonates well with Tuckman’s (1965) team dynamic curve. Manager-graduate B illustrated this nonlinear learning evolution and stated,

Team work is the most difficult issue to manage especially when the group is established at the beginning of the program and should finalize 5 projects and assignments on more than a year crossing different modules. Indeed, at the beginning, differences were huge to reach agreement, to listen to each other, to debate and defend ones’ ideas, convince and be persuaded by others. But, by passing time, every member has managed to recognize her role in the team and learned to work effectively.

Manager-graduate F expressed a positive expression about her team experience and emphasized the tensions he encountered as well as the learning she had. She stated,

I have saved a positive impression about my experience in my group *Dream Team* because interaction with peers allowed me to live situation of harmony but very often situations of conflicts and crisis; so, we were pushed to resolve this situation by putting into practice what we learned about leadership, conflict management and communication.

In the same direction, manager-graduate G confirmed that, “it was in moments of troubles that I have learned about my personality and others’. Complacency was then abandoned to be replaced with frankness when members were late to comply with the assignments’ deadlines”

Manager-graduates also reported that knowing themselves better with the help of the MBTI enabled them to manage the group cohesion and transform individuals’ differences to team synergy and exchange opportunities. Manager-graduate H stated,

I have lived this experience as a challenge, because we should have to preserve the unity of the group. The MBTI has revealed a lot of things about my personality. It also allowed me to frame the personalities of my teammates and position them into the matrix of strategies to adopt with every member.”

Data analysis also revealed that team work associated with reflection could lead members belonging to having worked in the same professional environment to know each other better. Manager-graduate J, a manager belonging to the in-company cohort, reported,

Teamwork experience was very special. In fact, I had the opportunity to work with the same persons, but in a pure professional context. Having this opportunity to share with them tasks in a different context of this MBA, allowed me to know them better and identify their personal attributes I did not know before.

Management behavioral transformation

The analysis of data revealed that the majority of respondents reported that the experiential nature of the MBA design has led to a positive transformation of their executive skills and observable competencies. These include people-centered and business problem solving competencies that improve management practice and performance. Manager-graduate B believed that, “my personality has changed especially from the perspective of attitudes and soft skills: good behavior, best way to resolve problems, and improvement in oral and written communication”. In alignment with my literature review, graduates confirmed that they improved their self-esteem and gained more confidence in their executive skills. Manager-graduate K illustrated this,

This MBA empowered me with self-confidence, because I have received a lot of compliments about my evolution. The return on investment has met my expectations; and finally, I will add, that self-confidence empowers the teams and fosters improvement and the collective performance.

Critical reflection activated in a multi project-based environment is a key process that leads students to learn what Mezirow (1991) called “new meaning” in reference to the new knowledge and management competencies they have developed. This is illustrated by graduate L,

the different modules and projects’ experiences provided me with a new perspective of thinking and communication in contrast to the pre-MBA period. I feel that my communication and critical thinking capabilities have improved, which ensures me some wisdom I did not have before.

The majority of graduates stated that working on integrated projects leveraged their problem-solving capabilities, their strategic awareness of the business environment, and fostered their integrative thinking. Manager-graduate N reported that, “the most important learning point is

that I was able to connect my practice to the normative context of the business, with methodology and pragmatism, by sensing actions taking place in my company either on the operational or strategic levels”. In the same perspective, manager-graduate M, summarizes his learning experiences stating that, “our learning has shifted from a partial reasoning to integrative thinking with a transverse vision”. Graduate Y believed that integrative thinking is a challenging learning outcome that requires a long-time horizon coupled with reflexive assessment on their part (Tagg, 2018). He stated,

Really, at the beginning of the program I did not understand this notion of integrative thinking, even if I am using it in my technical reasoning to some extent. After the first projects were finalized, I started to assimilate this principle of integrative reasoning that consist of connecting different disciplines when taking a decision. That has been of great use to me.

While integrative thinking is challenging on the individual level, analysis of data revealed that teamwork has been a leverage to develop this executive skill for the majority of respondents. Therefore, the interpersonal relations that activate students’ project-based experience enabled them to develop a *process-relational* focused competencies that reinforces the relevancy of MBA to management performance (Hay and Hodgkison, 2007). This is illustrated by Graduate B,

This MBA suggests an original pedagogical methodology to enhance the individual’s integrative reasoning capabilities. While that was difficult at the beginning of the program, teamwork has been helpful. Today, I feel empowered to connect different disciplines of business in respect of the configuration of strategic thinking (vision, mission, strategy, plan, budget...) and the tryptic of cost, quality and time to market.

Another finding was that graduates were strongly aware about the changes of their behaviors and adaptive capabilities on job settings (Dover et al., 2018). Manager-graduate R stated,

I recognize that by doing this MBA, the maturity of my management has evolved because of my new reflexes, my behaviors becoming situational, and I started to consider intercultural dimensions when dealing my clients. Now I feel empowered to continually challenge myself

Manager-graduate N, an international student working in Morocco for more than 15 years, confirmed that, “I have been exclusively working in the sectors of services. Finally, I could adapt my management to the local cultures. This learning experiences allowed to discover others business sectors, behaviors, and new professional approaches”. However, three of the respondents reported that their personalities have not changed and have learned rather, to adapt their leadership styles and problem-solving methodology to organizational context. Manager-graduate O stated that, “my personality has not changed much; rather the change is positioned at the level of methodology and problem-solving approach and my capacities to connect practice to business knowledge”.

Our literature review has emphasized that MBA relevancy might depend on the capacity of the curriculum design to connect to industry and resolve business related issues (Anderson et al., 2017; Rubin & Dierdorff., 2009). Data analysis revealed that project-based MBA offers the real experiential industry environments wherein students could integrate business courses to create business value to their respective firms and foster their *process-relational* capabilities. Illustrating this achievement, Manager-graduate S reported on behalf of his team,

we have implemented the synthetic rate of return (TRS) and improved productivity in a large industrial enterprise in the area. This initiative has brought in a bonus of 12 million Dirhams (1.5 million U.S. dollars) income for the company with an invaluable effect on the motivation and commitment of the teams.

Feeling empowered and self-confident, graduate managers stated that they were capable of handling complex professional projects on job settings with success. To support this finding, manager-graduate X stated,

Trusting my capabilities and my ideas, I could defend my needs and those of my company. During my academic journey, we were engaged in an important project's transfer from France. I was affected as the manager of this challenging endeavor from the technical and human sides. The transfer of the activity was a great success for my information technology (IT) company and myself.

The Chief Executive Officer of this IT company has recognized the relevance of this MBA curriculum design for his business and reported that the manager-graduates that followed the MBA "have deepened their managerial knowledge and developed a sharp sense of entrepreneurship." The analysis of data revealed that the majority of respondents have been promoted to a high managerial position before completion of their MBA. Career advancement resulting from behavioral change might be considered as an evidence of the relevance of the MBA experience as seen from the perspectives of graduates and employers. Manager-graduate P expressed that "on demand of my top management, I was promoted deputy director. Thanks to this program I feel confident because I can use tools to better argue my assumptions and structure my ideas, which impact the quality of my delivery". The same impression was expressed by Graduate B, O, and S, who were promoted to the positions of operations director, finance director, and chief information officer respectively.

The entrepreneurial attitude that graduates have developed through this long experiential learning journey enabled three of the respondents to launch their own business ventures. Graduate Z reported that "my objective at the beginning of the program was to get prepared to high management position. Finally, I was able to harvest during this learning process a project to launch a new business venture". These results, grounded in the experiential conceptual framework, confirmed the impact of individual learning styles on their career choices and course of their personal development (Kolb, 1984 as cited in Kolb and Kolb 2005).

This research is not without limitations. Because collection and analysis of data were limited to the context of UIC MBA instructional design, its professional identity, its graduates, and one corporate firm, we cannot necessarily generalize the conclusion beyond these groups. Besides, this study was based on the subjective reactions of the participants to their experiential MBA program,

therefore it may not reflect the objective results of the program as they move forward in the business world.

For future research, it could be interesting to compare the subjective evaluations of graduates in this program to the subjective evaluations of other graduates in a more conventional MBA program, which would provide a comparison and control that would reinforce the generalization benefit of this study. Another avenue for future research would be a follow-up survey to know how graduates' career progressed after completion of their MBA.

Conclusion

The knowledge that came out of this research illustrates that delivery and curriculum design are as important, and may be more important, than functional knowledge content. However, the results showed that MBA learners are being transformed when they engage with peers in a transformative and experiential learning environment that fosters reflexive learning and behavioral change. The relevance of MBA design would be assessed regarding its capacity to drive the management behavioral change of managers in the service of their organizational performance.

Because MBA education has been traditionally concerned with *what* to teach instead of *how* to teach, little attention was focused on the curriculum instructional design that turns out to be more *process* than *content*. While courses are discipline based and lend themselves to be loaded with knowledge content, decision making and managing people-centered competencies are content-free. They should be associated to a process with activities going beyond the boundaries of a course, which requires a specific pedagogical design with appropriate delivery mode and a challenging personal coaching support from instructors. PBL grounded in an experiential framework appears to be the ideal environment in which to activate this learning process. This study confirmed that the experiential and transformative design of this MBA has improved graduates' management behavioral skills and increased their chances getting promoted to key management positions.

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