Action Learning in Business Education: Exploring Different Models for Action Learning

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Session Goal

Develop an approach to thinking about different types of action-based learning and the circumstances under which each is more effective, including an idea of a new way to incorporate action-based learning in a course or curriculum.
What are the different types of action based learning?

– Field projects outside the classroom
– “Live cases” inside the classroom (e.g. executive presents a current problem)
– Simulations
– Student to student coaching
– Leading a group, team, or student organization
– Student lead investment funds
– Other?
Which, if any, ABL activity is best suited to complete the objectives of the pedagogy?

Factory time; Alumni time; Class time; Pecuniary costs

ABL activities may be only way to accomplish the objectives

Lowest cost option that accomplishes goals
Example: C-Level Thinking

Course Objective: Provide students a jump-start on developing such C(EO) level thinking skills via action learning.

Near entry levels, executives’ responsibilities tend to emphasize the technical details of solving tightly specified problems, e.g., performing financial analyses of particular proposals or crafting and executing marketing campaigns for new products. In contrast, at higher levels in an organization, executives need to be able to develop complex and rich thinking mechanisms, which we denote as “C-Level Thinking,” to deal with ill-structured and ambiguous situations.
C-Level Thinking: Capping off your MBA experience; kicking off the rest of your career

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Courses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring /Summer</td>
<td>Core Courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Core Courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>Core Courses, MAP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring/Summer</td>
<td>Course Theme: Strategies for Growth</td>
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<td>Fall</td>
<td>Course Theme: Executing the Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring/Summer</td>
<td>Course Theme: Competing Globally</td>
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**Course Theme:**
- Spring/Summer: Competing Globally
- Fall: Executing the Strategy
- Spring/Summer: Strategies for Growth
- C-Level Thinking
Fit in the context of the Weekend Program

**Sponsor**
- Monitor company’s situation (a)
- Identify significant developments, apparent threats and opportunities (b)

**CLT**
- Determine the true nature and dynamics of the forces driving the developments of concern and potential implications for the company (c)
- Confirm the reality and magnitude of the apparent threats and opportunities (d)
- Devise initial courses of action to address these threats and opportunities (e)
- Reach collective consensus on refined alternative courses of action and which to pursue (f)

**MAP**
- Develop implementation plans and achievement assessment procedures for each alternative course of action
Course Goals

- Capstone
  - Draw on the entire MBA experience, including MAP
- Thinking
  - Develop rigorous thinking to deal with an unstructured environment
  - Develop the ability to critique and assess
- Outcomes
  - Take a clear stand on a course of action
  - Be able to engage in thinking that can resolve apparently mutually contradictory goals and opinions across teams
- Communication
  - Tell a persuasive story
  - Develop the ability to present and think on feet
Course timeline

Introduction:
Jan 10
Read American Icon; watch videos
Debrief
Overview of course and assignment

Focal Threats and Opportunities:
Jan 12 – Feb 8
Background research on company
Feb 4: 2-3 page opportunity and threats study due
Feb 8: Q&A with CEO

Initial Recommendations:
Feb 9– Mar 26
Research; Mar 9: Research Findings update
Q&A with McKinsey’s Jeff Sinclair
Mar 26: Initial Report due

Final Products:
Mar 26 – Apr 12
Mar 28: Presentation to paired team
Apr 10: Final Report due; (combined with paired team)
Apr 12: Presentation to Sponsor

Action Learning in Business Education
The University of Michigan Law School International Transactions Clinic

BACKGROUND

Mission Statement: “The Clinic is an interdisciplinary, educational experience focusing on live, international transactions where law students provide world class, pro bono, legal services to clients that intend on making the world a better place through innovative business models, products and services”

- 18 months to plan and implement
- Clinic run by Director, support staff and pro bono outside supervising attorneys
- Full year commitment
  - 6 credits each term
- Initial startup issues (conflicts, engagement letters, file management)
- Initial client base
- Timeline: Boot Camp → Client Work

Action Learning in Business Education
ABL Success

- ABL experience not diluted by distance – clients and supervisors;
- If you build it they will come: Client base growth;
- ABL student absorption quite high;
- Mix of assignments allows student preference in both project and supervisor;
- Client feedback and repeat client engagements demonstrates client validation of value;
- Student feedback on Clinic supervision model positive;
- Employer endorsement of ABL
ABL Challenges

- ABA mandates
- Team productivity;
- Variable nature of client engagements and student dedications/time;
- Quality control and student/supervisor roles;
- Deal Flow and client expectations/needs;
- Appropriate level of ABL with classroom;
- Maintaining momentum;
### Example: ITC Experience

<table>
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<tr>
<th>What type of student does this work with?</th>
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<tr>
<td>• No first years and mix of second and third years; students need adequate skill base to execute expectations; student interest in international business</td>
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<tr>
<th>When in the program does it fit best?</th>
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<td>• Per above, and discussion in legal education on role and timing of clinics generally and “third year of law school” challenge</td>
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<th>What role does teamwork play?</th>
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<td>• Critical role for all parties involved: client, students, supervisors and a surprising challenge for the clinic overall</td>
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<th>How long does the activity take?</th>
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<td>• Two semesters, one year, which is necessary for skill base and deal flow</td>
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<th>Is there a progression or complementary relationship with another ABL activity?</th>
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<td>• Possibly, but commitment to this ABL is a significant amount of student allocation to ABL overall</td>
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1. Pick an experience you have had or one you have heard about and have an interest in and:

Determine which group it falls in

- Field projects outside the classroom
- “Live cases” inside the classroom (e.g. executive presentation a current problem)
- Simulations
- Student to student coaching
- Leading a group, team, or student organization
- Student lead investment funds

Then Answer the following questions

1. What type of student (e.g. MBA, BBA) does this work with?
2. When in the program does it fit best?
3. What role does teamwork play?
4. How long does the activity take?
5. Is there a progression or complementary relationship with another ABL activity?
6. What role, if any, do corporate partners play? What is in it for them? Are there constraints that need to be considered because they are involved?
7. What are the 2-3 major challenges with this model?
8. What are the major benefits of this model?
2. Divide into groups according to type of action based learning and discuss your answers as a group.

3. Report out

Goal: Develop overarching recommendations on situations in which your type of action based learning is more likely to be the preferred method of teaching.
Example: C-Level Thinking

1. What type of student (e.g. MBA, BBA) does this work with? **MBA** – needs to have had more work experience and be closer to this role in their career.

2. When in the program does it fit best? **At the end of the program** – builds on all of their course experience and their MAP experience.

3. What role does teamwork play? **Critical to both the initial conclusions but also an important part of the “resolving apparently mutually contradictory goals”**

4. How long does the activity take? **It is the entire semester**

5. Is there a progression or complementary relationship with another ABL activity? **Yes, we started out with an in-class case discussion; it is deliberately positioned after MAP to build on that experience**
Example:

6. What role, if any, do corporate partners play? What is in it for them? Are there constraints that need to be considered because they are involved? They are the CEOs that work with the teams. It gives them an opportunity to get fresh ideas and work with potential hires.

7. What are the 2-3 major challenges with this model? Getting the CEOs; Giving enough guidance while maintaining the necessary ambiguity; integrating with leadership program.

8. What are the major benefits of this model? Gives the students a glimpse of what they are aspiring to; increases the level of ambiguity, making more of a connection between their education and their work.