

**Preferential Learning Methods of MBA Students and the Overall Effect on
Classroom Success**

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Abstract. This is a study conducted to examine the relationship between preferential learning style preferences types and classroom performance of MBA students at a southeastern university. The purpose is to understand the preferred teaching/learning methods and how they relate to a student's overall success. This has been achieved by surveying graduate students in an MBA program. A survey was developed that measured the rating of students versus ten teaching/learning style e.g., case studies, simulations, etc. The mean preferences were calculated. The mean calculation yielded most preferred and least preferred leaning styles. We then correlated the learning styles against class performance to determine the preferences of the higher performing students versus the lower performing students. This research will provide valuable insight into the learning process and implications of certain teaching methods. The relationships are important to understand for both a MBA professor and a University as a whol

Introduction

The business world is ever changing and in order to stay relevant in this competitive market, schools of business must adapt and grow accordingly. Historically, the purpose of the MBA degree was to train individuals who were technically skilled in a particular occupational domain (e.g., engineers) and provide the functional knowledge and skills necessary to manage people and operations (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). In order to understand the current MBA trends it is necessary to examine past tendencies. MBA programs continue to evolve and introduce new learning techniques in order to remain valuable to students because the business world is changing so rapidly. According to Baruch, “the aims of MBA programs are to prepare their graduates for managerial roles, help them gain a better understanding of the industrial business world and its needs, enrich their skills and provide them with competences relevant to their careers” (Baruch, 1996).

In order to provide students with a thorough understanding of how to perform tasks in the classroom that will translate to real business situations expected upon graduation, it is essential to research how students learn best. Many studies have been conducted about long distance learning versus traditional face-to-face, but there is a general lacking of information about the implications between specific teaching methods and overall performance. Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) “empirically demonstrated a substantial misalignment between the competencies required by MBA curricula and managerial competencies requisite to job performance”. With

this in mind, and the necessity of the MBA degree being questioned, it is important to research further into the history of the degree and understand the changing marketplace, before we can understand the relationship between learning methods and classroom success.

Historically there have been many studies conducted on MBA students and their inherent learning differences, but again, there is a gap in research between how they learn and how they prefer to learn. When looking at research on MBA programs, often times, the findings of between desired curriculum and instruction delivered do not equate. Therefore, to create an environment that meets MBA standards and is conscious of how students prefer to learn, it is crucial to understand the links between performance and the methods by which students feel they learn best. We can assume the presentation of course material in various forms aims to accommodate all students, but are there some methods proven more effective than others? This is the issue MBA programs face today and there is a need to look further into feedback from the student's perspective.

This paper sheds much needed light on best teaching practices how in turn they equate to success in the classroom. By examining overall scores in relation to each teaching method we can begin to understand how classroom performance is affected. Section 1 of this paper will provide a brief background of the MBA degree and the current MBA trends. Section 2 of the paper highlights the significance of preferred learning and its effect on student success. Section 3 describes the research

method for this study and section 4 examines the results. Conclusion and analysis is presented in section 5.

Literature Review

History of the MBA

The MBA appeared in the US early in the 20th century. This became a common transition between undergrad study to professional work and popularity spread quickly. “While not the first to offer business courses, Harvard University is credited with establishing the first business program in the U.S. exclusively for college graduates” (The Harvard Guide, 2004). Harvard began offering graduate level business classes in 1908 and since then, the MBA has grown to be one of the most popular degrees in the US. In the 2008 school year, approximately 155,637 Master’s degrees in business were awarded (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). The MBA has continued to grow in popularity, and now this degree is second only to Master’s degrees in education. Although the MBA is highly popular, the curriculum and validity of the degree itself has been an issue in the past.

Traditionally speaking, most MBA programs include two years of rigorous course work with flexibility in delivery method. However, “formal efforts to develop curriculum standards for business education can be traced as far back as 1925 when the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) outlined a set of subjects expected to be covered in business programs: accounting, statistics, business law, finance and marketing” (Flesher, 2007). The strength of the curriculum aside, most major business schools recognize the need to continually

update their teaching techniques to reflect the changing business needs. This continuous criticism triggers yearly review and reconstruction of MBA standards worldwide, keeping studies relevant to the evolving business world of the 21st century.

Current Issues and Trends

The MBA degree seems to be growing faster than ever with increasing enrollment, increasing number of programs and the ever-increasing tuition cost. However, “The MBA degree may be a highly distinctive product, but it is not immune to the forces of the marketplace” (Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010). This is one of the main considerations a student must have before deciding to invest in an MBA program. As with any investment, students must first decide if the degree is worth the monetary risk especially in the current economic situation. In the past, having an MBA set you apart and made you an attractive candidate to a future employer. The current situation is much different and because of the increasing enrollment, the fear is that the supply of MBA students will exceed the demand. As previously stated, MBA programs and their degree of usefulness has dramatically changed in recent years. In the past, many as perceived having an MBA degree as “a passport to senior managerial roles and a ‘fast track’ career”. “The main motivating factors for obtaining an MBA is career advancement, career directional change, and increase earning potential and obtain general business knowledge” (Baruch & Peiperl, 2000).

Students often enroll in MBA programs and expect immediate return upon graduation. Many argue if these motivating factors are virtuous expectations or

simply unrealistic goals. “MBA graduates have been criticized as being too focused on the short-term financial aspects of business, not focused enough on the human side of business, and lacking in the communication, interpersonal and team-building skills needed in business organizations” (Harrington, 2010). This criticism has led students to request a more diversified teaching platform in order to meet these real-world needs. Along with student feedback, business schools must look directly at teaching methods and how they are adjusted to adequately fit each student’s demands. “Understanding students is a critical part of our teaching formula. Full-time students, for example, are very different from evening students. For that matter, executive MBA students are different from most any other student population that instructors may teach” (Barker & Stowers, 2002). In order to meet these needs, business programs must be open to change, and must fervently review student response and overall success rates.

Preferred Learning

Finding the balance between adequate teaching methods and preferred methods can prove difficult and is currently a popular issue of discussion (Barnes, Preziosi, & Gooden, 2004; Chad, 2012). The intention is to provide well-rounded, thorough knowledge of the subject matter and enable each student to not only articulate the information but also apply it to ‘real’ world business situations. However, considering the progressive business world and the effort to close the gap between the classroom and the workplace, it is advantageous for professors to use a variety of teaching methods (Ferguson, Makarem, & Jones, 2016).

As previously discussed, each student learns differently and each student has his/her own learning style. "A learning style is how a student *prefers* to learn, for example, by actively doing" (Leahy, Gaughran, & Seery, 2009). Making a cognitive effort to introduce teaching methods that meet learning styles is a challenge teacher's face at every level of schooling. The line between meeting requirements and considering expectations is difficult to avoid crossing. Looking specifically at MBA programs, this has been a sensitive issue. The issue now is not necessarily the coursework introduced, but how it is presented. As current or future business leaders, MBA students need hands-on teaching methods that can easily be applied to the professional work environment (Nicholas, 2008). To combat this requirement, projects, presentations and group work are essential. However, is this how business students prefer to learn, and is it how they learn best? The goal of all education is to introduce a topic and explain it extensively, in order for the student to not only learn but comprehend. As the great Martin Luther King Jr. stated, "The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically" (The Purpose of Education, 1947). With that in mind, it is just as important to monitor how a subject is taught, as it is to monitor the subject itself.

MBA students at UNA are required to meet certain educational standards before they are admitted to the program. They are admitted if they Bachelor's degree or equivalent and GMAT score of 450 or higher and a grade point average of at least 2.5 on a 4.0 scale (Reed, 2015). However, once admitted, student success is partly due

to their performance and party due to the teaching method compatibility.

“Awareness to learning styles is beneficial in education systems for many reasons. One important reason is that if the learning and teaching styles are not compatible, it usually results in unproductive learning” (Leahy, et al, 2009). In order to make a higher education system teaching-learning process more effective it is necessary to understand the learning styles of the students so that learning methods can be suitably adapted or modified. (Tripathi, & Sethi, 2014). Consequently, it is not only crucial to know what students prefer, but imperative to their success (Leahy, et al, 2009). Learning methods will have to continually adapt to engage and educate MBA learners. Nicholas (2008) suggests the interest in multi-media is shown by their responses favoring tech-friendly methods including spreadsheet analyses, video lectures, discussion boards and cases.

The Technology Generation

In the world today technology and innovation is an integral part of life, especially for students. Most MBA students are part of the millennial generation, born between the years 1981-1995, and they represent over 60,000,000 consumers in today’s society (Babin & Harris, 2014, p. 197). This means they grew up during the technology boom and they are “technology natives” or the “net generation”. That being said, does that mean this generation has specific learning tendencies that reflect this innovative movement?

To begin examining the learning inclinations we must understand the fast-paced tech culture in which the millennial generation was raised. A popular term for this generation is: “generation me” (Stein, 2013). They are constantly connected

to the world which creates this sense of belonging yet, they often prefer online connection versus face-to-face. “The largest psychological shift in the last few decades has concerned the movement toward focusing on the individual” (Garwood, 2015). This shift has many great advantages, especially in regards the individual rights of minorities and women. Personal differences between individuals are accepted and celebrated, not discouraged in this generation. However, this individual and “me” attitude can affect a society greatly, especially at the entry level of a business, or in this situation graduate-level learning (Stein, 2013). This selfish and individual attitude contradicts many of the current MBA teaching methods, most noticeably, group projects. Simply because this generation is “me” oriented, it does not inherently mean they cannot work in groups, but research suggests they prefer to work alone (Nicholas, 2008). This can be explained in two parts: the need to control their own destiny, and the generally high impatience levels of this innovative generation. These high impatience levels are a direct result of the “net generation” norms in regards to their exposure to unlimited Internet access, instantly.

Generational norms and values are directly related to how a generation is raised and the economic situation that surrounds them. Generation X, parents of the millennial generation, are a much more accepting and nurturing cohort and taught their children: “anything is possible”. According to research done by Twenge, “overtime agentic traits, or those necessary to succeed in the workplace, such as ambition, assertiveness and independence have increased in this generation’s

lifetime” (2009). This movement explains the “me” mentality and the desire to make independent choices without input from a group. These characteristics suggest that Generation me would benefit from a more structured but also more interactive learning experience (Garwood, 2015; Twenge, 2006).

Along with both of these notorious attributes to millennial learning, it is interesting to look at what they value most and how that changes how they learn best.

According to a study conducted by Bonner (2011), “millennial’s are hell-bent on change”, and are taught from an early age the importance of being “involved” in their learning over simply obtaining good grades. This fact can also help explain the positive reaction towards case studies and “real world examples”. These students are so connected to the Internet, the most invaluable learning to them comes from application of concepts not simply memorization.

Research Method

The following sections describe the methodology used in this study. This includes student survey sampling, data processing, rating of variables and significant correlations found.

Sample and Measurement

For this study, we collected preferential data from a group of 52 MBA students. We administered questionnaires asking them to rate each of these teaching methods: Lecture PowerPoint, lecture video, case studies, online discussion boards, excel, group projects, textbooks, research papers, E-books, and simulations. Students had been exposed to each of these teaching methods throughout the semester and voluntarily submitted this information knowing in advance it would not hinder nor

benefit final scores. Students rated each method using a five-point Likert type scale of -2 to +2. This data was collected and compared to overall student success scores. The overall student “success” was measured using five different variables: final exam scores, case study scores, pretest, posttest, and their overall class score; however, the correlations were found comparing the teaching methods to overall scores.

Among the 52 surveys collected 4 had missing rankings to certain methods and therefore, were discarded leaving 48 usable surveys. 48 questionnaires were returned fully completed, representing an overall response rate of 92.3%.

Results

The mean ratings for each teaching method are presented in Table 1. The rating system employed measures the intensity of preference for or against a particular teaching method. By averaging the intensity of preferences across all students, an approximation of a an overall rating is generated. By averaging the ratings, an intensely negative rating of -2 by one student can ‘offset’ a mild positive rating of 1 registered by two other students. Counts of intense positive and intense negative ratings, provided in the last two columns, indicate that students rarely assign intensely negative ratings, while commonly assigning intensely positive ratings. Of the 10 teaching methods, the most favored methods, as measured by the mean ratings, are Lecture Powerpoint, Lecture videos, and Cases, in descending order. The

three lowest rated methods are Research Papers, e-book platform, and simulations, also in descending order. As can be expected from the previous observation about rare intensely negative ratings, the mean ratings are all positive.

The principal goal of this research is not to simply identify favored learning methods, but to determine to what extent the student preferences are related to learning outcomes. One might expect a practical preference for the most effective method, but two entirely reasonable people may differ on their assessment of which method is most effective for them. The data we have gathered does not measure the student's learning style, as commonly identified with instruments designed to elicit learning styles in the traditional context. The focus of this paper is to identify the extent to which those student's preferences over the learning methods listed are correlated with learning outcomes, as measured by the final grade in the class.

Simple correlations between student's stated preferences and their final grades were calculated as shown in Table 1. The listing of learning method is presented in the descending order of the sign and strength of the correlation with final grade. Students who gave higher ratings to Excel tended to perform better than the students who gave low ratings to Excel. Students with high ratings for lecture videos, discussion boards, and cases were similar in the direction of positive correlation to performance, but with lesser levels of correlation.

Students who rated e-book platform and group projects highly tended to perform more poorly in the final grades, with the group projects oriented students having the worst overall performance.

Recall that Table 1 is presented in descending order of the correlation between preferred learning method and final grade. These calculations are correlations calculated at the individual student level, so the overall average rating for a learning method need not correspond to its contribution to success as measured by the final grade. Indeed, the pattern in Table 1 indicates that the learning methods with the most negative correlations are also among the least popular.

Table 1

Method	Rating	Final Grade		Intense +	Intense -
	Means	Correlatio	p-value		
Excel	0.67	0.2867	0.0482	10	0
Lect videos	1.48	0.1547	0.2938	30	0
Dis Boards	0.88	0.1543	0.2951	7	1
Cases	1.31	0.1407	0.3403	17	0
Res papers	0.35	0.0940	0.5250	4	2
Lect Powerpt	1.56	0.0872	0.5555	29	0
Simulations	0.13	0.0460	0.7563	4	1
Textbooks	0.42	-0.1193	0.4191	6	1
Ebook Plat	0.19	-0.2236	0.1266	1	1
Group Proj	0.52	-0.2574	0.0774	6	1

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