

Creativity in online courses: perceptions of MBA student

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ABSTRACT. Creativity is a key competency skill sought after by many employers. And yet, one of the major criticisms of business schools relates to its lack of programs that promote creative and/or innovative thinking. This could be compounded by the fact that a large number of business programs are currently offered online. Consequently, the issue of whether online education stifles or enhances students' creativity is brought to the forefront. Using this question, the authors engaged in an inquiry process dealing with MBA students' perceptions of how online courses impact their creativity. Based on students' feedback, it appears that taking online courses generally enhances their creativity. They are not only more inclined to be creative thinkers, but also more likely to be organized and exercise critical thinking. The students noted, however, that online instructors are largely instrumental in enhancing creativity. They also suggested that creativity cannot be integrated equally in all types of business courses.

KEYWORDS: *Distance education, Graduate business students, Innovative thinking, Marketing Management course*

Introduction

Fostering creative thinking among business students is no small task. Creating new business electives, developing corporate partnerships and exchange programs, consulting with entrepreneurs and executives are some of the means business schools are currently employing to enhance creativity and innovation in their curriculum (Business Week, 2005). These methods are primarily based on the premise that some form of traditional face-to-face or social interaction will be employed. However, in today's business schools, a growing number of programs are focusing on technology-mediated learning modes as supplements and/or alternatives to the traditional learning pedagogy. Indeed, technology-mediated learning via online delivery is quite common in most universities and colleges across the United States (Hollenbeck et al., 2005).

As a result, significant advances have been made in the area of online learning. With the growth and changes in online education, it is logical to pose the question: how will online education impact students' creativity? For business schools, this question is especially critical for two reasons. First, a number of potential employers are apprehensive about the academic quality and appropriateness of online programs (Dellana et al., 2000; Bigelow, 1999). Second, the question of whether creativity is diminished in online education remains largely unanswered in the extant literature.

The issue of creativity was brought to the forefront when a recent article in BusinessWeek.com was headlined with "B-Schools Soft on 'Soft Skills'" (Business Week, 2007). These 'soft skills' included human capital areas such as innovation and creativity. Two years ago, another Business Week article suggested that: "The core offerings of nearly all B-schools are not meeting the growing demand for creative, innovative managers" (Business Week, 2005, p.80). If business schools are not fostering the development of creative thinkers, will this be compounded by the fact that many business programs are currently offered via online education? To explore this question, the authors pose the question of creativity to MBA students currently enrolled in the core level graduate Marketing Management course. Based on their responses, suggestions are presented to help educators enhance the level of creative thinking among their online students.

Literature review

In general, the extant literature on distance or online education has focused primarily on two broad research areas. Ample research has been published on the benefits and pitfalls of distance education (Powell, 2007; Patel, Patel, 2006). There are also numerous studies comparing distance education with the traditional learning environment primarily in terms of cognitive factors - such as attitudes, outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, grades), student perceptions (e.g., preference, perceived quality) and learning experience (Spooner et al., 1999). Meanwhile, research on the integration of creativity in online education has been, at best, sporadic. This is despite the fact that creativity is considered one of the integral elements in the higher education experience (ChanLin, 2006; Jackson, 2006).

Creativity dimension in higher education

The relationship between learning and creativity has long been established in numerous research studies (Beghetto, Kaufman, 2007). Unfortunately, presenting students with creative instructional activities can be quite complicated. This is because creativity is related to a myriad of factors independent of the learning environment, such as personality, beliefs in education, cognitive processes, motivation, and individual background (Sternberg, 2005; Horng et al., 2005).

Creativity encompasses *the ability* to imagine or invent something new; *the attitude* to accept change; and *the process* to continue to improve (Harris, 1998). In other words, creativity is “the ability to come up with new ideas that are surprising, yet intelligible, and also valuable in some way” (Boden, 2001, p.95). Therefore, universities and colleges are, in part, the breeding grounds for creative thinking, since these institutions offer avenues for idea exchange and dialogue. Students’ creativity, according to Cropley, is indeed largely a function of one’s socialization in their education environment (Cropley, 2006).

In business education, the ability, attitude, and process relevant to creativity are instrumental in enhancing the professional success of business students. Evidence of students’ creativity is a competency skill highly sought after by employers (Horng et al., 2005). This is because employees who are able to combine both logical/rational thinking with creativity are more effective managers and corporate decision makers (Vance et al., 2007). As a result, business educators strive to train and develop students to be creative problem solvers. This is evident in the instructional pedagogies common in face-to-face traditional business courses, such as case analysis, team projects, and internships.

Creativity in online learning

As mentioned earlier, studies on integrating creativity into distance education have been sparse. For online business courses, integrating creativity is perhaps more challenging. The social dynamics in an online setting are invariably different from the traditional classroom. With the social environment conspicuously absent in a technology-mediated environment, how is creativity developed and fostered? And, if business students are not able to experience the creative process in their online educational

training, how will they in turn develop creativity in their work environments?

Muirhead and Amabile suggest that online instructors are primarily responsible for integrating creativity in their online curriculum (Muirhead, 2007; Amabile, 1999). Online instructors have to assume the role of a facilitator rather than a lecturer (Hornig et al., 2005). This can be accomplished by challenging students' current skill sets; providing well defined goals; grouping students into teams with diverse backgrounds; providing encouragement and timely feedback; making students feel that their inputs have more value added; and asking questions that encourage creative thinking.

Essentially, developing avenues for creativity is driven by the instructor. And yet, these instructors often receive minimal feedback from online students on what actually works, and what does not. Worse, there has been little research work conducted on this critical topic.

Objectives of this study

To examine the issue of creativity, and to bridge the gap in the literature, this study investigates the perceptions of MBA students taking an online course. In particular, the authors focus on whether online courses enhance or stifle students' creativity. That is, are online MBA courses exposing students to some exercise in creativity? Are online business programs enriching or diminishing the creative experience of its graduates?

Background information

The current study involves MBA students enrolled in an AACSB accredited regional state university. MBA students were utilized for this study, because of the professional nature of their degree, and their presumed maturity level. This is consistent with Arbaugh's suggestion that graduate students should be the basis for developing Internet-based courses (Arbaugh, 2000). The main university campus is located approximately 60 miles from a major U.S. metropolitan city in the Southwest. A large number of students enrolled in the MBA program are employed full-time, and take online courses primarily for convenience purposes.

Marketing Management course

The graduate Marketing Management course is one of the core courses in the MBA curriculum. Every semester, the course is offered both online as well as in the traditional face-to-face classroom. However, given the University's location as well as the type of students (i.e., employed full-time) in the MBA program, more sections are offered online than face-to-face.

Course dynamics

Two concurrent sections of MBA students enrolled in the online Marketing Management course served as the sample groups for this study. The same instructor taught both sections. Therefore, teaching style and course content as potential extraneous factors were minimized. Students' grades were evaluated, based on four major components: discussion/participation, case submissions, mid-term, and final examinations.

Currently, eCollege is the instructional online platform used by the University. For course discussion purposes, eCollege allows students to interact with the instructor and their colleagues primarily through the use of the discussion board. The discussions that took place in both sections were all asynchronous in nature. Typically, the weekly discussion was available over a period of three days. This gave MBA students ample time to provide their inputs, and interact with their colleagues.

Sample

A total of 63 students participated. Of the 63, fifty-two students had some level of experience in taking previous online courses. Approximately 70% of the students were in the 25-35 age range, and had worked for at least three years. About 90% of the sample group was employed on a full-time basis.

Creativity discussion

Halfway through the semester (i.e., before the midterm examination period), online students were asked to respond to a series of questions regarding innovative MBA programs, and the application of creativity skills within programs. A discussion board was set up to allow students to post their answers and/or respond to their colleagues' comments. The discussion questions were asked specifically within the context of online courses. To minimize

potential response bias, the questions were asked in relation to students' general online experience. The questions were not directed specifically towards this Marketing Management course. Online students were asked the following:

- (1) Do you lose any exercise in creativity in taking online courses?
- (2) What can be done to enhance students' creative thinking?

Findings

"Some" creativity is lost

Of the 63 online MBA students, 18 claimed that "some" creativity is lost in taking online courses. These students noted that some creativity is lost primarily due to the lack of social interaction. They posted that:

- Yes, definitely. Hands-on or face-to-face interaction encourages what real businesses are all about - being part of a team.
- The only loss that I feel from an online course compared to a live course is the interchange between students. Ideas can flow, and you can bounce off of each other better.
- Yes. The social interaction is an aspect that cannot be underestimated. One of my major concerns with online courses is the lack of interaction with other students.

The student comments above are consistent with Cropley's point that groups, role models, mentors, and classroom climate (i.e., elements of the social approach) are all important to students' creativity (Cropley, 2006). Obviously, the presence of these elements is more evident in the traditional classroom setting.

About 30% of the sample group suggested that creativity is driven by interaction. In particular, face-to-face interactions with other students and the instructor offer the chance to gain more insights and ideas from others. Likewise, the social interaction gives them an opportunity to expound on the experiences of their classroom colleagues in a visual manner. Guilford (1950) refers to this as "divergent thinking" (Guilford, 1950). The importance of divergent thinking is consistent with the distance education literature on social cognitive learning and social learning (Laffey et al., 2006).

However, it is noteworthy to mention that the students also suggested that in the traditional classroom setting discussions are

often dominated by a cadre of individuals. As a result, the rest of the class may end up being on the receiving or listening end of a few students' ideas. Hence, for these students the traditional classroom setting offers little or minimal avenues for creativity. One student posted that those students who usually would not voice their opinions in the classroom may be more likely to express their ideas in an online course. That is, students who typically would not participate in the classroom will be more inclined to express their ideas in an online course, and are more receptive to the online discussion (Horng et al., 2007).

MBA students' consensus - Creativity is enhanced

In general, the majority of the students (40 out of 63 students or 63%) who participated in this study agreed that creativity is not lost in online courses. Interestingly, some suggested that an online course is creative in itself. Twenty-eight students (44%) claimed that they are compelled or pushed to be "much more creative" in their online courses than in the traditional classroom to compensate for the absence of the face-to-face social interaction with their classmates and the instructor. Based on the students' responses, two reasons were offered on why creativity is actually enhanced.

First, more than half of the students claimed that they are more creative in their online courses, because they want their inputs to have more value added. They attempt to leave a more indelible impression in their coursework, assignments, and discussions. As a result, their discussion postings, case analyses, and projects are more in-depth, substantial and/or creative. As one student wrote: "I need to be more creative because I am unable to build a tangible relationship with the professor". This is consistent with Horng and colleagues' student-centred learning environment, where students become co-learners and performers.

Second, 40% of the sample claimed that, because their online MBA courses are generally more challenging, they have to be more creative and strategic in their thinking. One's input during chats and discussions must have some value added. Otherwise, it will become fairly obvious that one's responses did not deserve much merit. Likewise, term papers, team projects, and other types of collaborative works have to be developed in an efficient manner, given the interaction exchange constraints. Interestingly, this is

part of Horng and colleagues' class management strategies for creative teaching (Horng et al., 2007).

What enhances creativity?

Based on this sample's online experience, the students suggested that creativity can be enhanced and fostered depending on: (1) the subject matter and the instructor; (2) course format and structure; (3) grades associated with the creativity element. It was also noted that courses like math and statistics have lesser avenues for employing creativity, especially when delivered online. For example, marketing instructors can utilize a myriad of topics integrating creativity into the course material. In the case of one of the authors, as part of the discussion on advertising, students were required to watch Super Bowl commercials as part of the discussion assignment. The electronic interchange this assignment generated was quite lively, and demonstrated the various points of view students had in analyzing various advertisements. The use of multi-teaching aids, and the connection between teaching contents and real life are instrumental in developing creative instruction (Horng et al., 2007).

Ultimately, the consensus opinion was that the instructor has the responsibility to promote and challenge the way online students think. He/she has to be involved throughout the course, provide active leadership, and give value-added information. The typical reliance on any textbook, lecture notes, and presentations have minimal impact for online students. Instead, the format and structure of online courses have to be re-evaluated constantly. Are the course materials relevant? Have current business trends been discussed? Did the case analyses reflect the applications of various course concepts and topics?

The following are some examples of students' written responses:

- "It is not the online part that creates [creative] issues, but rather the course content".
- "I don't necessarily think that online courses cause loss of creativity. It depends on how the course is structured".
- "There is a greater tendency to let creativity slide in online courses. I think it really depends on the structure or format of the online course and the subject".

- “No, because professors often are more creative with assignments and methods of discussion with students”.
- “It depends on the nature of the course, and it is designed around emphasizing the creative exercises”.
- “Online courses are good programs for self-learning, so I think there is nothing to lose in creativity”.

Creative instruction used in this Marketing Management course

For this particular marketing course, the authors believe that creativity was enhanced through the management of the class discussion and interaction as well as the use of real business questions to stir the students' creative thinking. The grading scheme was set up so that 50% of the final grade was assessed, based on two components: case analyses and discussion participation. The case analyses involved business problems that required students to be analytical, competitive, and creative, in their presentation of viable business solutions. The students were also required to participate in a weekly discussion board. They were required to provide a discussion post, and respond to their colleagues' comments. The topics covered interesting and current marketing-related topics, such as ethical marketing (e.g., is ethics an oxymoron in marketing?); fads, fashions, and trends (e.g., provide some examples); demographic segmentation (e.g., changing demographics of U.S. consumers); sex in advertising (e.g., why sex sells), to name a few. It is also noteworthy to mention that, during the discussion of cases and topics, the instructor played a strong role in prompting thought-provoking questions, and interjecting personal thoughts regarding the subject matter. Feedback was also provided in the form of a summary of the weekly discussion. Consequently, the instructor was viewed by most students to be quite “visible”, which may have led to the development of an interactive relationship.

Conclusion

Creative instruction encourages independent thinking, active participation, and freedom of expression (Horng et al., 2007). Based on the findings in this study, we can conclude that online MBA

students are indeed exposed to creative instruction. Creativity is not necessarily minimized or diminished, if online instructors invest their time in establishing well-defined goals, and developing a course curriculum that provides ways for students to express their ideas and insights. When online MBA students are exposed to this type of learning experience, then business schools have done their part in providing avenues for divergent thinking. After all, divergent thinking is essential in understanding the dynamics of any business environment.

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Sintesi

Una recente ricerca statunitense ha indagato la percezione degli studenti sulla capacità dei corsi online MBA di generare spirito creativo, in relazione alla crescente domanda di operatori dotati di creatività e propensione all'innovazione da parte del mondo delle professioni e degli affari. I corsi MBA sembrano carenti proprio nello sviluppare spirito di innovazione e creatività, mentre la rapida crescita dell'offerta di corsi online MBA pone al centro la questione delle capacità della formazione online di migliorare le attitudini creative degli studenti. La creatività, del resto, è una dote complessa e di difficile insegnamento, che include immaginare qualcosa di nuovo, propensione al cambiamento e miglioramento continuo. Nella formazione a distanza non è ancora stato chiarito come stimolare questi processi, anche perché poche analisi teorico-pedagogiche si sono soffermate in maniera sistematica sulla ricerca di metodologie efficaci per favorire la creatività nei corsi online. In questo contesto, le opinioni degli iscritti ai corsi online di una università del sud-ovest degli USA offrono nuove informazioni sull'impatto dell'e-learning sulla creatività, al livello di percezione degli studenti.

La ricerca ha avuto come destinatari gli iscritti al corso online di Marketing Management, per la maggior parte lavoratori a tempo pieno, che ricorrono alla formazione online per conciliare studio e lavoro. Su 63 studenti partecipanti al corso, 42 avevano esperienze pregresse di corsi online. Circa il 90 per cento di loro era impiegato full time, circa il 70 per cento aveva un'età compresa tra i 25 e i 35 anni e lavorava da almeno 3.

Strumentale per l'indagine è stata la piattaforma eCollege, adottata dall'università a cui si fa riferimento, che utilizza una discussion board in modalità asincrona per gestire discussioni settimanali tra studenti e docenti su argomenti selezionati. Le discussioni rimangono aperte per circa tre giorni, in modo da dare agli studenti il tempo di contribuirvi.

A metà del semestre, è stata organizzata una discussione tematica in piattaforma in cui gli studenti dovevano esprimere il proprio parere su quanto i corsi online favorissero la creatività e su come fosse possibile migliorare questo aspetto. Secondo 18 dei 63 partecipanti all'indagine, a causa della minore interazione con

i compagni di corso, “qualcosa” si perde in termini di creatività nella formazione online. Infatti, circa il 30 per cento degli studenti ha confermato l’idea di Cropley che socialità ed interazione siano fattori stimolanti della creatività, con particolare riguardo all’interazione face-to-face. D’altro canto, gli studenti hanno anche notato che nelle classi tradizionali la discussione è solitamente guidata da una piccola parte della classe, mentre la maggior parte degli studenti tende ad avere un ruolo solo passivo e ricettivo. In questo senso, i corsi online sono percepiti come un ambiente in cui un maggior numero di studenti può far sentire la propria opinione.

Al contrario, la maggior parte degli studenti dei corsi online (40 su 63 pari al 63 per cento) hanno affermato che la creatività non si perde nella formazione a distanza. Secondo il 44 per cento degli studenti i corsi online producono maggiore creatività per compensare la mancata interazione con i docenti. Inoltre, circa il 40 per cento di essi pensa che la creatività è stimolata dalla necessità di essere adeguatamente notati e valutati dal docente e dai compagni. Infatti, non potendo contare su forme di interazione presenziale, i contributi del corso diventano più approfonditi e creativi. In definitiva, sembra che proprio la dimensione dell’interazione a distanza renda cruciale la qualità dei contributi proposti e la valutazione strategica delle attività svolte.

Gli studenti hanno anche analizzato quali aspetti dei corsi online vadano rafforzati per sostenere la creatività: in primo luogo, non tutte le discipline sono adatte all’esercizio della creatività. Alcune materie, come la matematica e la statistica, incorporano con maggiore difficoltà elementi di pensiero creativo, mentre in altre è possibile utilizzare contenuti quotidiani, per esempio l’analisi di spot pubblicitari, per sollecitare discussioni più animate e creative.

In base alle risposte degli studenti, il ruolo decisivo si conferma essere quello svolto dai docenti che devono partecipare attivamente alle attività e sostenere gli studenti con sempre nuovi input e rinforzi. Il loro intervento è sentito da tutti gli studenti come fondamentale soprattutto nelle discussioni, in cui i docenti possono introdurre nuovi spunti, fare domande provocatorie e mettere alla prova gli studenti. Per un altro verso, la struttura e i contenuti costituiscono dei fattori di criticità; i contenuti, infatti, devono essere costantemente migliorati, aggiornati e adeguati al progresso delle teorie e alle esigenze del mercato; il format deve favorire l’interattività e il lavoro di gruppo. Infine, i risultati della ricerca evidenziano l’esigenza che la creatività espressa da uno studente incida sulla sua valutazione alla fine del corso. Nel corso analizzato la valutazione finale si è basata al 50 per cento sul risultato dei case studies e delle discussioni. Nel primo caso, bisognava proporre soluzioni e strategie efficaci e innovative per risolvere problemi economici e di affari; nel secondo, si offriva quel confronto tra studenti e docenti che è stato il principale banco di prova delle capacità di innovazione e creatività degli studenti.

