

## ‘From [virtual] classroom to boardroom’: Coaching students to use a research approach to address contemporary issues in their workplace

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The Australian Institute of Business (AIB) exclusively serves the needs of working adults and seeks to deliver life-changing experiences for students through a contemporary and practical curriculum delivered online. A key feature of its MBA is a final capstone subject whereby students apply the knowledge acquired during the degree to a business issue in a professional context. Adult learning has been found to be most effective when knowledge is constructed based on workplace problems. However, as industry practitioners, many students find this challenging and have historically struggled with the research-based nature of the capstone subject.

This paper reflects on how the MBA Project was re-conceptualised to help students navigate the challenging waters of a final research project. Guided by a coaching mind-set, we experimented with a range of online tools within an andragogical framework to create effective learning activities and engage students to address contemporary issues in their workplace. Not only did this revised capstone achieve the highest completion rate of all the MBA subjects offered, it had a positive influence on student engagement, learning and their overall educational experience as more than 90 percent of students ‘safely reached port’ and completed their MBA.

Keywords: adult learning, capstone, authentic assessment, coaching, online education, MBA

### Background

The Australian Institute of Business (AIB) is the largest MBA provider in Australia. It exclusively serves the needs of working adults and seeks to deliver a life-changing experience for students in more than 90 countries. Workplace learning has been seen to be most effective for adult learners when knowledge is constructed based on workplace problems and when they can reflect on their personal learning experiences (Cunningham, 1998). There is also widespread scholarly support for the benefits of connecting academic learning with workplace learning (Cunningham, 1998; Fung, 2017; Zuber-Skerritt & Abraham, 2017). As a result, the ‘university of the future’ must have greater industry engagement and embrace the notion of lifelong learning (Cawood, 2018).

While this paradigm shift presents a challenge, and the sector faces increased disruption, Fung (2017) claims that all university study should give students “the chance to connect academic learning explicitly with the areas of knowledge, skills and approaches needed both for professional work and for their future lives in society [developing] capabilities and personal attributes for life and work in a changing world” (p. 84). As such, it should come as no surprise that many institutions now seek to connect curriculum to practice in order to provide a more ‘authentic’ educational experience. This presents a longstanding challenge, and educators often struggle to take adult learning from the ‘classroom to the boardroom’, yet this is precisely what AIB students demand. As a result, its MBA leverages the involvement of industry partnerships and sees students complete a business research project that applies their newly-acquired knowledge to a business issue in a professional context.

### Evolution of the MBA Project

Application and integration of knowledge is an essential part of a Masters qualification and AIB graduates are required to complete a capstone subject. The fundamental characteristics of a capstone fall into six categories: i) integration and extension of prior learning, ii) authentic and contextualised experiences, iii) challenging and complex scenarios, iv) student independence and agency, v) critical inquiry and creativity and vi) active dissemination and celebration (Australian Government Office for Learning & Teaching, 2015). Thus, students



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are required to identify a workplace-based issue, conduct a small literature review, engage in data collection, analyse the data and then present findings in a formal business research report. However, as industry practitioners, many students struggle with such a subject. In early 2017, over 1,400 students had been enrolled in the capstone subject for over six months and so the decision was made to re-conceptualise the MBA Project to create more effective learning activities for our student cohort and better mirror authentic professional practice.

Considering these challenges, trials were conducted between May and August 2017; the first with 21 students, the second with 252. Based on positive early success, the revised capstone was officially rolled out to students in September 2017. Guided by a teaching philosophy – a coaching mind-set informed by extensive industry experience – we experimented with a range of andragogical and technological tools to develop a suite of resources: instructional and coaching videos, formative feedback mechanisms and an online discussion forum with dedicated ‘coaches’ to help our adult learners navigate the challenging waters and ‘safely reach port’.

### A Series of Instructional and Coaching Videos

AIB’s student cohort displays many of the characteristics of adult learners: self-direction, internal motivation, experience, readiness to learn and goal-orientation (see Knowles, 1984; Knowles et al., 2015). However, as industry practitioners, not only are they largely unfamiliar with academic research techniques, they are time poor with full time work and family commitments. Andragogy is centred on the idea that the educator should act as a facilitator in the learning process and students are actively encouraged to participate by drawing on their own experiences (McGrath, 2009). It was therefore imperative that the re-designed MBA Project successfully connected academic learning with workplace learning and delivered effective learning activities and assessment to facilitate a more ‘authentic’ educational experience. Authentic assessment sees students complete tasks that mirror what they do beyond university and applies what they learn to solve complex problems like in professional practice (Arthur, 2017). If learning is authentic, they are likely to be more motivated as they can connect the new material that is being learned with prior knowledge (Mims, 2003). As Mueller (2016) explains, authentic assessments integrate teaching, learning and assessment so that students are “learning in the process of developing a solution, teachers are facilitating the process, and the students’ solutions to the problem becomes an assessment of how well the students can meaningfully apply the concepts.” Therefore, the MBA Project’s assessment and learning materials were ‘building blocks’ in the preparation of their final report, i.e. how can you integrate and then apply what you’ve learned during the degree to a contemporary issue in your workplace?

Where previously AIB delivered a blended online model, complemented by labour intensive, synchronous one-on-one coaching, we developed a fully online asynchronous approach to allow large numbers of students from all over the world to complete the capstone within seven weeks. Technology is also able to provide a more student-centric environment that can engage and inspire students to learn and support 21st century learning (see Spector et al., 2016; Ravitz, 2002). As such, we created a series of ten videos, tailored to the task at hand, to help make complex and difficult concepts easier to understand. Tasks required to complete their final Project Report included: Introduction (involving a formative ‘Project Statement’ assessment, capturing the background, topic and project purpose); Literature Review; Methodology; Data Collection and Analysis; and Writing the Report (including findings, reflections, implications, recommendations and conclusion). Some of these videos were purely instructional whereby students were given new skills, while others were coaching tools and showed students how to use these skills to improve. A summary of these videos can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: A summary of the types of videos used in MBA Project**

Topic	Type	Learning	Engagement	Experience
Welcome Subject Overview Recording	Coaching		X	X
Project Plan and Weekly Progress Report	Coaching			X
Project Statement - Overview	Coaching	X	X	X
Project Statement - Example	Instructional	X	X	X
Project Statement - How to Find Secondary Data	Instructional	X		
Data Collection - Private Organisations	Instructional	X		
Literature Review - What is a Literature Review?	Coaching	X	X	X
Literature Review - Example	Instructional	X	X	X
Project Analysis	Coaching	X	X	X
Project Structure - Putting it all together	Instructional	X	X	X

Video has supported education for many years and can create a multisensory learning environment, especially in online courses. Consistent with research that describes the efficacy of videos for adult learners (Hibbert, 2014), the ten videos were directly linked to the subject's assessment. They used conventional language and humour and drew on the past career-related experiences of the presenters to convey information that students could not just read in the learning material. The videos averaged 13 minutes in length (depending on the complexity of the material taught) and production quality was relatively high with very high engagement by students. More than 75% viewed the videos in their entirety in the first trial and nearly all did so in the second trial (Table 2). This figure dropped off a little when the subject was rolled out to nearly 400 students in Term 5.

Another challenge is that teachers who wish to use authentic learning must learn to think like a coach (Mims, 2003). The notion that teachers might be seen specifically as 'coaches' "upends and rebalances the traditional student teacher relationship [and offers] a relatively new, yet incredibly promising approach" (Olson, 2014). We explored the opportunities presented by this approach and adopted a coaching mind-set throughout the series of videos and guided students on their journey through the capstone. However, authentic instruction requires a different role than traditional teaching, as students are "now in control of their learning and it is important that you not take that power away from them" (Mims, 2003). This coaching mind-set was highly successful and, when asked to evaluate its effectiveness, most respondents suggested they would like even more videos and more than three-quarters said they were at least 'helpful' in completing their Project Report. For instance, one claimed that "the new online portal with videos and a clear breakdown of the subject is fantastic" while others believed that "more videos assist in the learning process" and that "your videos have been truly inspiring!"

### Supporting Teaching Materials and Coaching Forum

These instructional and coaching videos were supported with additional teaching materials (e.g. PowerPoint slides, examples of sample submissions, research methods literature, search engine tools, a project planner, etc.) and a general discussion forum was open to students two weeks before the start date so they could post questions well in advance of the 'Project Statement' submission deadline. Students were then assigned to discipline-specific forums (e.g. marketing, finance, human resource management) with a discipline expert, an Online Facilitator (OLF) or, for the purposes of our discussion, 'coach'. In small class sizes, of no more than 25 students, these OLF coaches guided students towards successful completion of the MBA's capstone subject.

Students responded very positively and more than 87 per cent of students viewed the discussion forum posts, while at least half of the students across all three terms actively posted in the forums (Table 2). Students could also message or request a telephone call if they had private or confidential academic issues. Locke and Lathan (1985) believe that goal setting can increase the skill and confidence of athletes and leads to better performance by individuals within an organisation. Consistent with this coaching mind-set, OLFs and students alike were able to track their progress towards key goals in the form of four self-assessed progress reports that highlighted areas for additional 'coaching'. In addition, when the revised capstone was rolled out to nearly 400 students, the commonly asked questions from the two trials were collated and answered in a FAQ forum. This proved very effective and the average student viewed 13 posts. Thus, students successfully gathered knowledge by interacting with the online environment and engaged in a learning community to address their workplace issue.

**Table 2: A summary of student engagement in MBA Project**

Measurement	Trial 1	Trial 2	Term 5
Number of students enrolled	21	252	386
Percentage of student submission rate (% of subject pass rate)	95% (100%)	96% (98%)	93% (92%)
Percentage of the videos viewed in their entirety by students (proxy for the number of students who watched the entire video)	76%	97%	72%
Number of times, on average, each student watched the videos	2.35x	1.68x	1.38x
Percentage of students who posted at least one class forum post	62%	65%	54%
Percentage of students who viewed at least one class forum post	95%	95%	87%
Percentage of students who found the video content helpful/very helpful in writing the report (from student feedback survey)	93%	75%	N/A*
Percentage of students who found the support in the forums helpful/very helpful to complete report (from student survey)	87%	67%	N/A*

\* This question was not on the student evaluation survey given to students from Term 5 onwards.

## The Project Statement as a Coaching Tool

Locke et al. (1981) explains that goal setting – in our case, completion of the literature review, analysis of the data, etc. – only works if there is timely feedback showing performance or progress towards that goal. The introduction of weekly progress reports was therefore a critical step in plotting the performance of students as they progressed through a reconceptualised MBA Project. However, one major ‘road block’ in earlier versions of the capstone was the requirement for students to gain approval for their research proposal before being allowed to collect and analyse data. This often required a lengthy process of submission and re-submission and was frustrating for many students; industry practitioners who could find a research-based subject challenging. Given that the purpose of assessment is to support learning (Black & William 2006, cited in Spector et al., 2016), this approval ‘road block’ was a source of frustration and highlighted the importance of timely and supportive feedback.

Given the struggles faced by students when faced with a formal research proposal, we re-imagined its role and introduced the ‘Project Statement’, formative assessment that would help students crystallise their ideas around a suitable workplace-based issue and one they could adequately address within the confines of the teaching period. This short 500-word assessment was due in week two and required students to clearly articulate an appropriate reason for the issue chosen, effectively establish its context in the organisation being considered and outline how they intended to approach their project. Unlike the previous capstone, the project statement was not a ‘road block’ impeding student progress but rather an opportunity to receive invaluable feedback on their scope of topic, proposed methodology and even viability within the time frame. As such, while this formative assessment was being graded by OLFs, and moderated by the teaching team, students were strongly advised to continue working on their project and to collect background information relevant to their workplace-based issue. Formative assessment, unlike high-stakes summative assessment used to evaluate student learning at the end of a subject, helps educators address problems immediately for those students struggling to understand concepts or tasks and can help students identify weaknesses and target areas that need work (Carnegie Mellon University, 2015). These types of assessments are an integral component of good teaching, student motivation, engagement and higher levels of achievement (Ecclestone, 2010), and are also typically not heavily weighted toward a subject’s overall grade. The project statement was therefore designed to engage students early in the subject with the key concepts and learning materials, motivate them to identify an important workplace-based issue that would add value to their organisation and was only weighted at 15 percent of the final grade to incentivise submission, yet with no formal requirement that students pass the assessment item. Its purpose was to support learning and develop the confidence to develop the project while also minimising the stress historically seen when students were required to develop a research proposal.

Consistent with the andragogical literature, this revised Project Statement was supported with ‘coaching’ and feedback mechanisms to improve learning and give students the guidance to confidently proceed with their chosen project topic. To and Carless (2015) (cited in Spector et al., 2016) stress the importance of feedback mechanisms and the opportunity to use technology to support formative assessment. Feedback is also most effective when it focuses on the purpose of the assessment and is given regularly while still relevant (Collins, 2013). Therefore, we gave students access to several online resources – project statement videos, an exemplar statement with annotated comments suggesting areas of improvement, a discussion forum, FAQs and a dedicated OLF ‘coach’ – to help students prepare this interim assessment.

Feedback works best when students receive confirmation that they are on the right track and whether improvement is needed. However, any suggestions for improvement should “act as ‘scaffolding’, i.e. students are given as much help as they need to use their knowledge” (Collins, 2013). The OLF was critical in this scaffolding process and to help them understand their role and best use the project statement as a coaching tool, they were each given a sample of graded project statements from previous trials to benchmark against and develop an understanding of the task. They were then asked to mark three submissions within two days. A member of the teaching team then provided coaching tips and guidance as to how to give supportive and constructive feedback with sufficient clarity and detail to help students use their own knowledge and insights to continue with confidence. As one student explained, “can I express how grateful I am for the project statement feedback ... This was excellent and really got me back on track ... by far the most useful feedback I have received through the entire course.” Hattie (1999) (cited in Collins, 2013) argues that giving feedback involves establishing trust between the teacher and student and time must be made to talk to students and teach them to be reflective about the learning objectives. Thus, after receiving feedback, students were encouraged to continue the discussion in their own class forum and both OLF and student alike had weekly progress reports as an additional feedback mechanism to track progress towards key milestones and provide additional support for any ‘at risk’ student.

## Conclusion

This paper discusses the evolution of the MBA Project, a research-based capstone that sees students apply their newly-acquired knowledge to a workplace-based issue. However, since students often struggled with the research-based nature of the capstone, the decision was made to reconceptualise the subject, to embrace a coaching mind-set and use a range of technological tools to create effective learning activities. While the notion that educators may be coaches upends the traditional student-teacher relationship, it offers promising opportunities to drive student engagement and learning. Adult learners tend to be self-directed, ready to learn and internally motivated yet by adopting a coaching mind-set throughout this re-design and delivery, we successfully connected academic learning with workplace learning. As a result, we have designed a capstone that better mirrors professional practice and facilitated a more 'authentic' educational experience that hopefully delivers graduates with higher levels of overall satisfaction with their MBA journey and sees them 'safely reach port'. Ultimately, perhaps the last word belongs to one of our successful MBA graduates ...

I loved the new format for the Final Project. The step-by-step process starting with your videos were [sic] amazing, and really helped break the process down into bite size chunks. I've ended up with a report I'm really happy with, that has real relevance for the company I work for. The directors of my company have already read a copy of the report and we are immediately putting its recommendations into place. So, thanks so much for re-imagining what this Final Project could be.

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