



## Management Skills Development through Experiential Knowledge Creation Networks in Higher Business Education: A Case Study

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### Abstract

*Traditional business teaching lacks relevance for professional practice and therefore practitioners' engagement in its formal learning and assessment processes should be proposed. However, business accreditation standards widely rule out their involvement and, as a consequence, professionals' engagement in higher education has only been researched marginally.*

*Experiential knowledge creation networks, business educator-practitioner networks, as the synthesis of connectivist and experiential forms of knowledge development, might be supportive in order to improve business education's practical relevance: they engage practitioners in collaborative learning communities and are integrated into higher education's formal business learning, teaching and assessment processes.*

*The paper illustrates preliminary results of a case study, conducted at a Swiss Business School. The research examines, how professionals in experiential knowledge creation networks effectively promote business students' practical management skills development and shall guide business educators how to practically institutionalize them in order to improve practical relevance and congruence of business school programmes.*

### 1. Introduction

Friga, Bettis and Sullivan (2003, p. 237) underline practitioners' potential in business knowledge creation when they state: "It is important to recognize that knowledge creation takes place not only in ivory towers, but also in corporate boardrooms. The key for improvement in the educational value chain is to identify the different options for increasing overall knowledge "production" such as more clearly recognizing respective roles of all parties involved". Kelliher, Harrington and Galavan (2010, p. 113) support these arguments in their discussion of business leader's potential role as actively participating experts in business education and research: "[i]n the physical sciences the researcher is generally more intelligent and knowledgeable than the object being studied. In a social science study the 'object' of study may be the expert". However, by their own academic and professional qualification criteria for business school faculties (AACSB 2013; ACBSP 2013; EFMD 2013), global business accreditation standards, which otherwise promote professionals' involvement in business school's governance and programme development, generally rule out a responsible involvement of business professionals in formal business learning and assessment processes.

### 2. Experiential Knowledge Creation Networks

Alternative connectivist forms of knowledge creation such as networked learning, namely online learning networks, which directly links the learner to the learning object (Yeager, Hurley-Dasgupta and Bliss, 2013), seem to be theoretically relevant and practically valuable for practitioners' engagement in higher business education, where the learning objects are the business leaders and their managerial environment. In particular, learning network's ability to extend the institutional range towards practitioners' workplaces and managerial environments (Kop, 2011) predestines unlocking potential synergies in knowledge collaboration between business academia and practice.

Furthermore, experiential learning, as a practice-oriented education model, provides a key framework for holistic, authentic, workplace-embedded learning setting linking business theory to practice (Beckem and Watkins, 2012; Glick, 2013; Green and Farazmand, 2012; Hart and Mrad, 2013; Li, Mobley and Kelly 2013; Liu and Olson, 2011; Kamath, Agrawal and Krickx, 2008; Roach-Duncan, 2010; Sigmar, Hynes and Hill, 2012; Tiger, Chiangnan and Fuan, 2013; Updyke, 2013).

'Experiential knowledge creation networks', business educator-practitioner online networks and the focus of this research, are the synthesis of connectivist and experiential forms of knowledge creation: they responsively engage practitioners in higher business education, are developed towards collaborative online learning communities and are integrated into higher education's formal business learning, teaching and assessment processes.



### 3. Research Questions and Design

#### 3.1 Research Questions

The following research questions have been defined: a) How do professionals engaged in experiential knowledge creation networks effectively promote business students' practical management skills development? and b) How do business educators provide practical relevance of business learning, teaching and assessment through experiential knowledge creation networks at institutional level?

#### 3.2 Research Framework

Within an inductive case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), the examined online learning settings build multiple embedded units of analysis (Yin, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), where business educators and professionals in experiential knowledge creation networks collaborate online in different 'instructional conceptions' (Kember, 2000). The research design follows a qualitative, interpretative approach and "addresses questions about how social experience is created and given meaning" (Gephart, 2004, cited in Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 28). However, empirical evidence for the inducted theory is provided through a blended construct where qualitative as well as numeric data are integrated.

As stated by Richards (1993, p. 40), "both (prior theory and theory emerging from the data) are always involved, often simultaneously", and that "it is impossible to go theory-free into any study" (Perry, 1998, p. 788). As theoretical grounding for this case study, two frameworks were integrated as basis for data collection and analysis: Carver, King, Hannum and Fowler's model of experiential e-learning (2007) to evaluate students' learning experience as well as Steinaker and Bell's experiential taxonomy (1979) to examine practitioners' self-conception regarding their instructional role.

#### 3.3 Participants

The following groups participated in the case study:

**4 Business Educators:** identified by researcher, based on the ownership of the academic or professional qualification criteria defined by the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs for business schools faculty members (ACBSP, 2013).

**4 Business Practitioners:** middle and senior managers from Swiss-German companies of various sizes. In order to count as 'practitioner', in any case, they mustn't be employed as full- or part-time faculty in business education programmes, mustn't have conducted any programmes in order to enhance pedagogical skills or showing any teaching experience within an educational institution's context.

Around **90 Business Students:** cohorts of the institutions' Bachelor of Applied Sciences (BASC) part-time programmes, identified by the researcher, based on thematic and time coincidence of their study and assessment plans with the learning settings examined within the research project.

**2 Educational Administrators:** identified by researcher, based on their organizational responsibility and involvement in academic and pedagogical development of learning, teaching and assessment in the institution's Bachelor of Applied Sciences (BASC) programmes.

#### 3.4 Evaluation and Data Collection

Evaluation and data collection is adopted from Kember's popular framework applied for action research projects within higher education contexts (2000) in order to apply a solid and widely recognized theoretical fundament and to increase practical applicability and comparability to other higher business education institutions. The research venue is researcher's own institution, HSO Business School Group Switzerland, where the following data collection and evaluation methods are applied:

- Student Online Survey after conducting the course (and before learning about the assessment outcomes).
- Personal interviews after participation as facilitator in the course (Practitioners) respectively after students' assessment (Educators)
- Student Assessment according to the school's examination regulations
- Participants of each group are involved as focus group members in order to address the institutional research question

#### 4. Preliminary Results

Between February and April 2015, 3 cases involving 3 business educators, 3 business practitioners and the total of 64 students were conducted. Practitioners were involved as 'practical experts' on the subject of marketing and communications: the business students virtually provided their own practical context and directly discussed their issue, respectively organizational challenge with a business practitioner within the institution's virtual learning environment. The learning outcomes were solely assessed by the business educators.

Through cross-case analysis (Yin, 2009) patterns are currently being identified and elaborated towards theoretical findings and propositions. This 'cross-case synthesis' (Yin, 2009) is processed with qualitative and quantitative data collection methods applied in a developmental-expansive respectively sequential explanatory design (Greene et al., 1989, cited in Bryman, 2009). At that time, the following preliminary results may be provided (results are presented either as percentage or as value on a 4-point Likert scale):

As far as the respondents are concerned (n=20), all show prior work experience. 60% had at least 5 years of professional track record. 45% had some, 1 respondent even qualified work experience in the field of study, namely marketing and communications. Most of the students are employed as assistants or case managers (55%), Around one third (35%) serve in an operative management position while only a few (15%) are middle or senior managers. Those business students with some or qualified professional experience in the field of study were generally more positive on practitioners' impact on their learning experience and success (2.63) than non-experienced students (2.00). Referring to Carver's et al. (2007) concept, the following preliminary findings can be presented:

**Learner-Centredness:** Even though the goal-oriented task setting and the therefrom derived learning process ensured achievement and valid assessment of the intended learning outcomes. However, it negatively affected autonomy of learning regarding students' own understanding of his or her professional context.

**Competence:** Students' own experiential, respectively professional context, impeded practitioners' accession to the learning object and thus an effective involvement in new skill development and knowledge creation. At the same time, linking students' previously obtained theoretical knowledge through the practitioner was evaluated as effective in order to promote students' competence building.

**Belongingness:** Practitioners' physical absence did not lead to lower student motivation or dynamism in student-practitioner interaction. However, there is an inherent role conflict between educator and practitioner, that, in some cases, caused confusion and irritation in practitioner-learner communication.

**Agency:** Practitioners, who scored higher in participative instructional approaches in the role of a catalyst, significantly promoted more student self-empowerment than those in the role as motivator, sustainer or moderator (Steinaker and Bell, 1979).

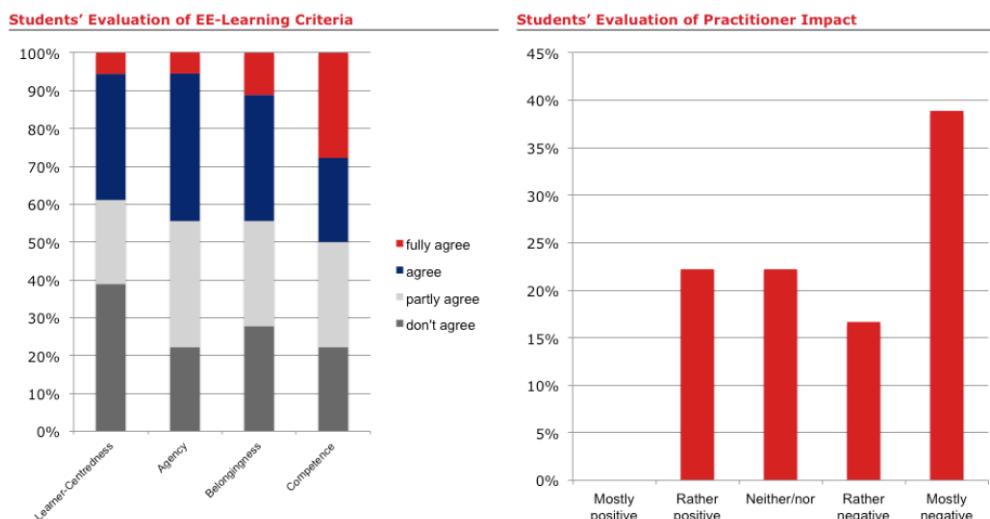


Figure 1. Student Learning Experience and Practitioner Impact.

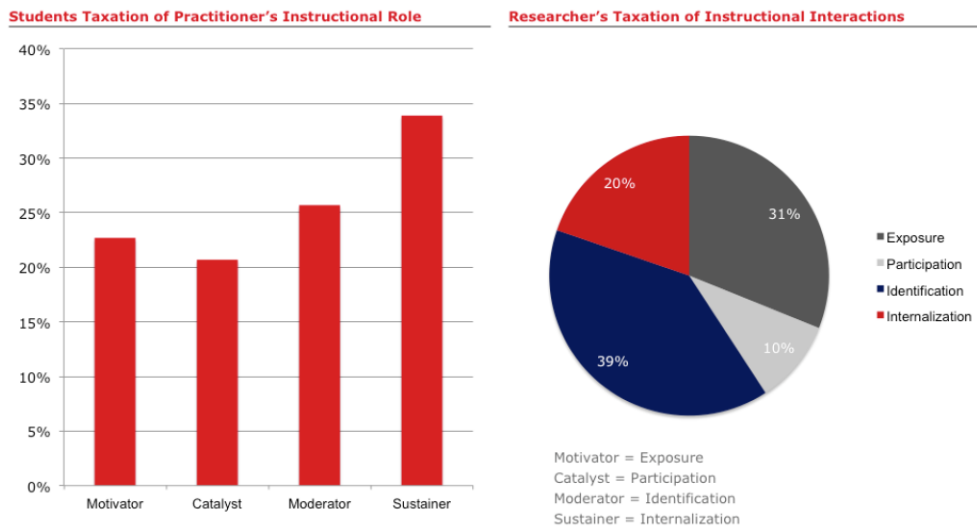


Figure 2. Instructional Role and Interactions.

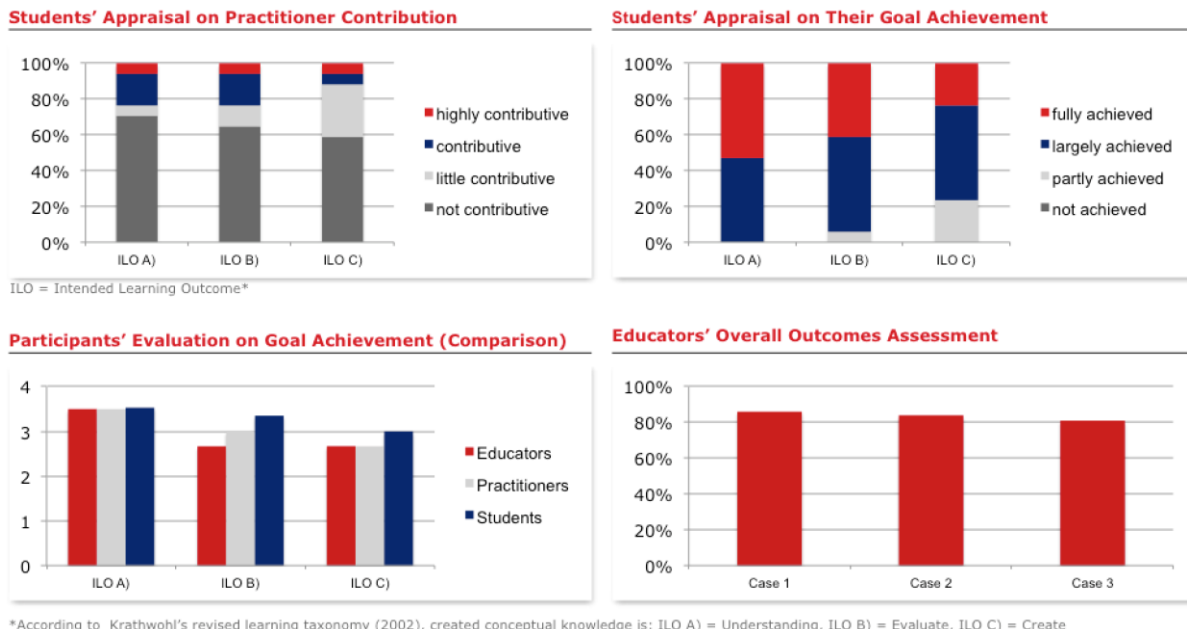


Figure 3. Student Learning Outcomes.

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