

Engaging Students in Life-Changing Learning

Royal Roads University's Learning and Teaching Model in
Practice - Revised Edition

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Engaging students in life-changing learning : Royal Roads University's learning and teaching model in practice / edited by Stephen L. Grundy, Doug Hamilton, George Veletsianos, Niels Agger-Gupta, Pedro Márquez, Vivian Forssman & Myriam Legault. — Revised edition.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77510-991-4 (softcover).—ISBN 978-1-77510-990-7 (PDF).—

ISBN 978-1-77510-992-1 (EPUB).—ISBN 978-1-77510-994-5 (HTML).—

ISBN 978-1-77510-993-8 (Kindle)

1. Teaching. 2. Learning. 3. Education, Higher. 4. Royal Roads University.

I. Grundy, Stephen L., editor II. Royal Roads University, issuing body

LB1025.3.E52 2017

371.102

C2017-907520-9

C2017-907521-7

Problem Based and Collaborative Learning in Action: The Applied Business Challenges in the Bachelor of Commerce in Entrepreneurial Management Program

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Abstract

Using real-life situations as the stimulus for learning, Problem Based Learning (PBL) has become more prevalent in management education. After a redesign, the Royal Roads Bachelor of Commerce in Entrepreneurial Management (BCom) program has introduced three one-week, one-credit PBL experiences with a common theme of case analysis, called Applied Business Challenges. Each Applied Business Challenge (ABC) is designed so that the students immerse themselves in analyzing and resolving business challenges via an internal case competition, an international case competition, and a live-case consulting project. These ABCs illustrate a

concrete application of Royal Roads University's learning and teaching philosophy and practice, specifically with respect to experiential and authentic learning, an integrative curriculum, and the development of a strong learning community.

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Introduction

Royal Roads University's Learning and Teaching Model (LTM) has evolved since the formal opening of this special purpose university in 1995. Launched in September 1996 as one of the first programs at the recently created Royal Roads University, the Bachelor of Commerce in Entrepreneurial Management (BCom) program was the first on-campus program offered using an innovative design and teaching approach that capitalized on its attempt to be as relevant to the marketplace as possible. With on-campus and blended modes of delivery, the program was conceived to respond to the demands of the labour market by meeting the needs of early-career professionals interested in completing a flexible undergraduate management degree with emphasis on entrepreneurial skill development. The program was innovative because it was one of the first of its kind designed for mature and motivated students, allowing them to join the labour market after only 12 months of study (on-campus) or be able to work and study at the same time over a two-year period (blended).

The program adopted a constructivist approach and combined a set of andragogic features to serve its purpose. Like other programs at RRU, it adopted a problem-based/community learning approach, employing the Case Method and Collaborative (team-based) Learning as its main instructional techniques aimed at helping students obtain a concrete set of learning outcomes. Instead of leading to strong functional expertise as most other programs did, the program focused on developing well-rounded "managerial thinking" through the use of a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach.

Over the last twenty-five years, considerable attention has been given to the use of learning-centric approaches to teaching such as inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, case-based learning, action learning, and problem-based learning (Major and Palmer, 2001). Despite their methodological differences, all these approaches emphasize the importance of active and collaborative engagement in defining, understanding, and posing solutions to real world issues. As well, these approaches respect individual differences in learning styles and build on previously acquired experience. They seem well-suited to applications in professional education programs where learners often have substantive experience in the profession and are seeking ways to apply new skills and knowledge directly to enhance workplace performance. The PBL approach, in particular, has made significant inroads into medical, education, and business schools as educators seek ways to make their curricula more integrative, problem-focused, and constructivist in orientation (Major and Palmer, 2001).

PBL uses complex and authentic tasks or real-life situations as the context and stimulus for the learning process. These "problems" tend to be ill-structured and open-ended, requiring learners to use an inquiry-based

approach to identify existing information that is pertinent, developing questions to acquire new insights, and gathering further information to assist in the analysis of the problem (Donnelly and Fitzmorris, 2005). Learners acquire and apply critical thinking, self-directed, and team-based learning strategies to wrestle with the real-life implications and meaning of these problems in order to analyse, understand, and eventually propose solutions or other strategies to manage or address the problem. The process attempts to reflect the kinds of authentic problem-solving processes encountered in professional applications or other real-life situations.

This chapter describes the particular use of PBL as a business education approach, supported by the Case Method and Collaborative Learning, adapted to the specific nature of RRU's BCom program. Introduced five years ago were three purposefully designed one-credit courses at the beginning, mid-point, and end of the program referred to as Applied Business Challenges (ABCs), all with a common theme of "case analysis." The ABCs support the accomplishment of the program's learning outcomes through an "in-house" experiential learning process. Participating in a mini-case competition, ABC I introduces the students to, and expands their comfort with, the Case Method as used across the program. ABC II builds on students' understanding of what a case competition is and provides a space for the students to practice their management skills by organizing an International Case Analysis Competition on campus. Finally, as a one-week long problem-based learning activity, ABC III challenges the students to integrate and apply their learning into a live-case scenario with real clients dealing with current business challenges. This chapter briefly describes the BCom program's design and purpose, highlights its most important learning and teaching features, and elaborates on the design and implementation of these three Applied Business Challenges. The most meaningful experiences are highlighted and an overall assessment of the effectiveness of this approach is incorporated.

The Bachelor of Commerce in Entrepreneurial Management

Although the BCom program has changed through the years, particularly as a consequence of an in-depth program review and redesign in 2010-11, the program is fundamentally a completion-degree program, comprising years three and four (60 credits), and delivered in two unique delivery formats: (1) a 12-month compressed on-campus program, and (2) a 24-month blended program. These variants were launched with great success, recruiting two different student profiles to each program modality. The program is innovative and is a flexible alternative to those interested in advancing their credentials while limited by the professional or personal demands of early and mid-career professionals. The admission criteria includes a minimum of three years of work experience, high motivation and drive to learn, and a desire to participate in a dynamic learning community. The program is particularly attractive to those applicants who find it difficult to adjust to the

traditional admission requirements and/or time restrictions of the programs offered by institutions in their local regions.

At inception, the program offered an innovative constructivist model that employed four unique features not frequently found in the traditional management undergraduate programs of the time. First, the program was designed around five concrete learning outcomes: effective communication, critical thinking, problem solving, working with others, and global thinking. Secondly, unlike most other similar programs offered in Canada, this program placed a greater emphasis on developing a well-rounded entrepreneurial mindset¹ instead of advanced specializations (i.e., marketing, finance, accounting, operations management, or human resources). This was accomplished throughout the program in different ways. The two most important were the students' completion of a major final knowledge-integrating project, and, after 2003, the option of participating as competitors or volunteers of the Royal Roads University International Undergraduate Case Competition (RRUIUCC). Third, the program was offered in two innovative delivery structures: on-campus and blended. Each of these structures served the needs of two different markets producing unique learning experiences for either the compressed (on-campus) or the blended learning communities. Finally, in order to recruit students capable of succeeding through what was seen as a personally and intellectually challenging constructivist program, a different admissions philosophy was developed. Instead of admission being granted on the basis of completion of sufficient 100/200 level courses and a high grade point average, admission to the BCom program required the completion of a diploma, regardless of field of study, a strong learning motivation, a willingness to join a team-based learning environment, and at least three years of work experience. For those applicants that lacked post-secondary education, an opportunity for individualised flexible admission or prior-learning assessment was established, fundamentally recognising the professional competencies acquired through on-the-job experience.

The Applied Business Challenges

In accordance with RRU's Quality Assurance Policy, a program review in 2010 provided a major assessment of the BCom's market relevance and pedagogical effectiveness. Some of the feedback from alumni gathered through this review process concerned the optimum use of the Case Method, and the RRUIUCC competition and mechanisms to bring the case competition training and experience into the BCom program by design. Such requirements triggered a major program redesign in 2011. One key challenge identified was related to the structure of the program and the need for extensive student involvement in the planning and execution of the

1. "Entrepreneurial mindset" is defined as the capacity to conceive, plan, and execute new initiatives within established organizations, or the pursuit of new ventures.

RRUIUCC. The BCom redesign was an opportunity not only to introduce case analysis training, but also to re-structure the courses and terms with the goal of expanding the competition in both pedagogical impact and relevance. The Applied Business Challenges (ABC) resulted from the program redesign team's efforts to improve the program's capacity to meet its learning outcomes and respond to the feedback and challenges expressed by students and alumni.

Under an overarching theme of case analysis, the ABCs were designed as three complementary one-week, one-credit courses situated between terms in which the students immerse themselves in the process of resolving business challenges via an internal case competition, an international case competition, and a live-case consulting project.

1. ABC I – The Mini Case Competition

ABC I consists of a mini case competition delivered to each cohort of students over the course of one week (plus one more week for the final deliverable) and worth one credit.

According to Gamble and Jelley (2014), case competitions “provide business students with opportunities beyond the classroom setting to learn, network, and engage with complex problems”. Students work in teams to propose alternative solutions to a pre-selected written case after three hours of thoughtful analysis and discussion. The students are expected to be intelligent and strategic about their choices because their recommended solutions are shared through a formal 20-minute presentation to a panel of judges, followed by a 10-minute question-and-answer session. This internal competition allows the students to increase their analytical, decision making, critical thinking, and teamwork and communication skills through a memorable learning experience. In addition to the intense work put in during the week, the students are also asked to reflect on the week and what they have applied to the analysis from their previous courses, then to submit their individual reflections to the instructional team.

Case analysis training includes: ‘how to read a case,’ with tips and tricks for maximizing learning; useful analysis tools, including drawing upon what students will have learned from their earlier courses such as Strategy and Financial Accounting; how to work/make decisions as a team; ‘in-room dynamics’; as well as presentation skill and tips for working with PowerPoint. During training, students become familiar with the scoring sheet being used, watch a video of a previous case competition team’s presentation, and score it themselves as if they were judging it. Finally, teams do small case analyses and presentations to the cohort for the purposes of learning from one another and receive considerable feedback in preparation for the assessed cases on the final day.

Cases used in this competition are typically 15-25 pages in length, with some

financial statements or other exhibits for analysis. Many cases are sourced through Ivey Publishing; however, sometimes RRU School of Business cases are used. More recently, there has been an initiative to coordinate the cases chosen for ABC I with cases that will be used in the students' upcoming courses.

The intention of the competition component is to promote learning through problem solving and collaboration, within the context of the social pressure produced by a carefully structured competition. For example, each day involves a new case requiring analysis, preparation, and presentation. There is no overnight reading or homework, which is a positive variation from usual term coursework. At the end of the competition, the winning team is announced, followed by a celebration of the week's accomplishments. At such point, 30% of the grade has been determined: 10% for contribution/active participation during the week, and 20% based on the case competition final ranking. The final deliverable for ABC I is an individual reflection, worth 70% of the grade and limited to 1500 words. The reflection must reference each of the five learning outcomes for the program. The reflection is evaluated based on the student's ability to communicate clearly, and should be a reflective demonstration of how they have applied their learning to the case analysis.

ABC I has evolved since it was originally conceived in 2011. There have been 13 mini case competitions delivered since January 2012, to both on-campus and blended BCom students. Based on student feedback, changes are introduced after each iteration, including the overall number of cases within one week, the length for case analysis, the number of cases done within one day, the number of judges per panel, the amount of training and the type of activities used in training, and the level of difficulty of the cases.

One important change has been the method of team selection for the on-campus cohort, who had initially been put in their first term teams for the challenge. They now do ABC I in new teams based on the positive feedback from the blended students who have always been put into their new teams for the mini case competition as a way to get them working together face-to-face before heading back online for another year.

The recruitment of judges for the mini case competition was originally focused on the RRU staff and faculty community as a means to engage them with the students; many non-academic staff have minimal face-to-face contact and appreciate the chance to see the students in action and to provide the teams with gentle, constructive feedback. Over time, judge invitations have extended to include members of the external community, such as local Chamber of Commerce representatives and employer contacts through our Student Services' Work Integrated Learning unit.

Feedback on this course has been primarily positive. Blended students appear to find it more rewarding than on-campus students, possibly due to the fact that it is a very interactive activity, and gives blended students

a condensed opportunity to practice their presentation skills. That this happens during their second residency, when they have not seen each other for a year, helps to promote bonding within the cohort. Many on-campus students have reflected positively on the mini case competition, however, overall the feedback has been mixed, which has led to the more frequent adjustments to the on-campus delivery. The switch to putting students in new teams has resulted in a significantly happier group in recent offerings.

2. ABC II – the RRUIUCC

The second Applied Business Challenge is one-week long with an additional week provided to submit the final deliverable. It is worth one credit and builds upon the experience in ABC I with the organization of the RRUIUCC. During the week, the BCom students are either responsible for competing as representatives of RRU or for running the various components of this international competition.

The RRUIUCC is held on campus every spring and is run by a small group of on-campus BCom students under the direction of program faculty and staff. The first competition attracted 14 teams, including one from the United States. Since its inception, the competition has grown considerably in size and reputation; the most recent competition (2016) included 20 teams from universities across Canada, the US, and Europe.

ABC II occurs between the second and third terms, however, a great deal of preparation and role selection happens beforehand. For instance, at the start of term one, students are presented with two specific co-curricular opportunities:

1. **RRU Case Competition team tryouts.** After an overview of the training requirements and competition tryouts, up to five students are selected to be on the competing team; and
2. **Executive Director (ED) interview.** After an overview of the RRUIUCC, students are invited to apply for the ED position. Interviews are conducted, a selection is made for either one leader or two co-leaders. Subsequently, the ED recruits other BCom students to the various key ‘executive’ roles, such as judges coordinator, live case writer, social events coordinator, and others. These role titles are not prescriptive, rather the recruitment of the individuals and their role definitions are left to the ED as an opportunity to “build their core team” and to acquire valuable learning in the process. RRUIUCC executive teams have been as small as 5 people and as large as 14 (with several co-chairs). Most importantly, the student executives are given the freedom to “make it work.”

The RRU competing team and RRUIUCC executive team work diligently for at least four months leading up to the RRUIUCC/ABC II. The remainder of

the students (e.g. 20 in 2016) participate fully in the RRUIUCC according to their assigned role:

- *Ambassadors*: escort and assist one competing team through all four days of the competition, including pre-arrival communication, welcoming students upon arrival, and escorting them through each case analysis and presentation (as well as monitoring them for adherence to the rules).
- *RRUIUCC Judge/Presentation Room Coordinators*: responsible for keeping one of five presentation rooms on schedule and in accordance with the rules. Each coordinator works directly with one lead judge for the duration of the competition.
- *RRUIUCC – other roles*: includes runners who obtain USBs from teams, make hand-outs, and deliver them to judges, as well as presentation videographers, general photographers, gala slide show creators, emcee/s, scorekeepers, and more.

Depending on the size of the BCom cohort in a given year, the RRUIUCC executive team may play multiple roles during the actual days of the competition. By the end of ABC II, it is true that both the RRU competing team and the RRUIUCC executive team will have put in considerable more effort than those assigned to other roles during the competition; those individuals, however, have considerably more potential skills and lessons learned than the others to apply to their future careers.

Students “learn by doing” in areas such as scheduling, logistics and supplies, volunteer management, communications and marketing, judge recruitment, budgeting, sponsorship, and hospitality. This is the only component in the BCom program that all students work on or experience as a whole because most of their coursework is individual or team-based. Similar to ABC I, students are then asked to reflect on their individual experience during the RRUIUCC and submit a reflective paper. By week’s end, 20% of the ABC II grade has been determined. The remaining 80% is based on the student’s individual reflections on the connections between their learning experience and its relation to the program learning outcomes.

As well, ABC II has evolved through time. There have been five ABC II courses delivered, starting in 2012, with changes being made each time based on student feedback. For instance, a Case Analysis deliverable was recently implemented to reinforce students’ case analysis skills and provide a better link to the running theme of the Applied Business Challenges. Prior to this change, students involved in the RRUIUCC had to complete an operational analysis, based on their role in the RRUIUCC, and identify areas for improvement for the operation of next year’s event.

Feedback about this course has been mixed. Many students have commented on the positive element of this being a whole-class activity, as opposed to something done in teams or individually. Many students have also

commented on the learning obtained by observing the real-time behavior of their peers in an organizational setting that connects nicely with prior coursework in leadership. Nevertheless, there are also many comments about a lack of understanding of the benefits of the activity in anticipation of the case competition. As a result, greater effort is required to reframe the course and competition as important sources of learning for their career development. For instance, a future reflection might ask a student to connect an observation (e.g., the team they are hosting) to something they have learned in a prior course (e.g., leadership styles or teamwork).

3. ABC III - the Live Client Case

For the final Applied Business Challenge in the program, students take part in a Problem-Based Learning activity with a live client/case. Unlike ABC I and II that use written cases, the live-case requires a local business organization to share with the students a current and yet unresolved business situation. Unlike traditional cases, live cases lack teaching notes, pre-identified alternatives, or conceptual models to be used. Mirroring professional business consulting, live cases are conceived to be the ultimate test for students' abilities to face the complexities of the business world. As a result, when students work in teams to address real-life, community-centric business challenges, they are exposed to open-ended, complex, and loosely-structured problems that promote critical and creative thinking (Kennedy, Lawton and Walker, 2001).

ABC III is a one-week long activity, worth one credit. Student teams are introduced to a client company and hear about their challenges/issues directly from its CEO/founder. Student teams then ask questions, conduct research, and receive guidance from the instructor as needed. At the end of the week, students prepare a recommended course of action for the client via both a presentation and written report. Because this course is located three-quarters through the program, the expectation is that students will already possess a strong set of business tools and acumen, research experience, and communication skills.

At week's end, 65% of the ABC III grade has been determined, for contribution (15%, individual), the final case presentation (25%, team based), and the final case report (25%, team based). The case presentation, lasting a maximum of 10 minutes, is expected to contain a situation description, problem identification, issues analysis including additional research and resources beyond the case, statement of criteria employed for decision making, alternative solutions, and final recommendation(s). The remaining 35% for the individual reflection is due one week later, and like the individual reflection in ABC I and ABC II, the students are asked to reflect on their learning in relation to the program learning outcomes and how they have applied the learning from all courses taken to that point in the program.

ABC III has evolved through time. Since 2012, there have been 11 ABC III

courses delivered, including four on-campus and seven blended. Adjustments are made each time and have resulted in the following improvements:

- the introduction of the reflection to align with ABC I and ABC II,
- augmented training in problem-based learning (PBL) prior to client introduction,
- the need for the students to come up with a problem statement early in the week to ensure that they are researching what the client is actually interested in,
- clearer articulation of the presentation format, and
- increased clarity in the briefing process with the client and/or a different type of client.

Overall, students find the ABC III to be a positive learning exercise. Negative feedback has been less about the process and overall learning; rather, it has focused more on the actual quality or behavior of the client involved. For example, one on-campus client involved a service (“green” pet cremation) that several students found emotionally difficult to research. Another cohort’s client was not as available for consultation as they should have been. Practical feedback about timing and deliverables has been acted upon and changed with each offering.

ABCs and the Program Modalities

Because the two program modalities offer a different course sequence, the ABCs had to be adjusted to fit each specific course delivery structure. For the on-campus delivery, ABC I was situated between the first and second terms and was viewed as not only the best placement for the case analysis training/content and competition, but also as a good way to get the students back into the swing of coursework after the winter holiday break. It also ensured that the students had the experience of a case analysis competition themselves, in advance of the RRUIUCC. ABC II was situated between the second and third terms, just after a 2-week break, in alignment with the general dates of the RRUIUCC. This has to take into account the timing of breaks and finals of other universities and other case competitions. ABC III was situated between the third and fourth terms—again, just after a 2-week break before students’ final courses and capstone projects. For the blended delivery, participation in the RRUIUCC is logistically impossible; therefore, the blended cohort combined ABC I and ABC II into a longer, seven-day, two-credit mini case competition, occurring when the students are on campus for their second residency. The one-credit ABC III is offered entirely online to the blended students.

The Applied Business Challenges and the Learning and Teaching Model

The Applied Business Challenges emphasize the importance of three particular components of the Learning and Teaching Model: (1) Experiential and Authentic Learning, (2) Integrative Learning, and (3) the Learning Community.

Experiential and Authentic Learning

All three ABCs are designed to promote “learning by doing.” From each of the three challenges, the students should take practical skills into their current and future careers. ABC I compels students to work as a team within a short time frame, to read a case, to do an analysis of it using the skills and tools learned in prior coursework, and to present their team’s “solution and recommendation” to a panel of live judges. Judges often ask the students tough questions, based upon their own experiences in business. Highly transferable skills from this experience include the ability to: (a) read a written case in a short amount of time and distill, synthesize, and apply what is most important; (b) apply the appropriate tools to a situation; (c) work through the analysis and presentation preparation with three to five other people within a short period of time; (d) gain helpful practice in the art of presenting; and (e) think on one’s feet during a Q&A period, and defend one’s decisions/recommendation.

ABC II allows the students to experience the highs and lows of planning and executing a real, live business case competition, replete with the fun and excitement of a social event for 200+ people, as well as the sometimes tense situations brought on by the unique personalities of an individual judge, coach, competitor, or fellow student. The practical relevance of this experience will differ for each student. The RRUIUCC Executive Director, for instance, will have learned lessons about managing a team of peers, while a presentation room coordinator will have acquired valuable skills in time management.

Through consulting on a “solution” for a live client, students hone in ABC III the skills from ABC I. This is an authentic experience given the added element/realism of dealing with a real business owner’s accessibility (or lack thereof), personality, and ability to accept the students’ final recommendations (and possible criticism). As well, it provides the opportunity for students to learn the skills of communicating effectively and, sometimes, persuasively with clients and customers. This experience should be highly applicable in the students’ future careers.

Integrative Learning

By design, the ABCs require students to synthesize what they have learned from each previous course, as well as their own work/volunteer experiences

prior to coming to RRU. Each case analysis in ABC I allows the student teams to draw upon the skills taught and tools recommended. For instance, if the company in a case is wondering whether to expand their operation internationally, the RRU BCom blended students will have knowledge from their *Doing Business in a Global Economy* course to inform their recommendation to the judge panel. In addition, ABC III draws upon students' honed research skills nearing the end of the program. While less explicit in its intention to incorporate prior course subject matter, ABC II is more observational and behaviorally-oriented. Learning by managing a large project—with volunteers and many moving parts—can be incorporated into students' future team interactions and work environments. Furthermore, observing one's own and others' behaviors within the greater whole of the competition can have an impact going into future courses in the BCom program as well as future workplaces.

Integrative by design, the individual reflection deliverable is intentionally due more than one week past the end of each challenge so that students have the time to contemplate how all prior coursework has contributed to their performance through the lenses of the program learning outcomes.

Learning Community

The BCom program cohorts are built with the specific intent of creating a strong learning community. At the start of each cohort/intake, the program office delivers a day-long “learning community day” intended to form important bonds between individuals coming together for a common goal. The ABC mini case competition provides another opportunity for each cohort to come together for a fun, yet challenging, goal: competition between teams. This is especially valuable to the blended students returning for their second residency. And as described, the RRUIUCC/ABC II is viewed by many as a rare opportunity for the entire cohort to work on one goal together—the execution of a world-class event—further solidifying the learning community.

Conclusion

This chapter has described how the 2011 redesign of the Bachelor of Commerce in Entrepreneurial Management program allowed the adoption of a set of unique androgogical methods and learning activities, aligned with the university's Learning and Teaching Model. Specifically, three core components of the LTM exemplified by the Applied Business Challenges are: Experiential and Authentic, Integrative, and the focus on development of the Learning Community. Through their active participation in a case competition, executing an international competition as a cohort, and working with a live client, students draw upon and integrate their prior knowledge and deliver on student learning through the lens of the program learning outcomes. Based on considerable feedback, students have become

more aware of how their skills and abilities have been transformed by their involvement with the ABCs.

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