

## **DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES THROUGH APPLIED LEARNING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Increasingly, adult students, including those with significant industry and/or military backgrounds, seek graduate degrees in business fields. Many of these midcareer adults already hold positions of responsibility and leadership, so they are more sophisticated and prepared than early university students. This paper describes teaching methods used in a graduate program that address the needs of experienced, working adults using multiple, integrated learning theories. Student experiences are integrated into the classroom to prepare students to return to their organizations to solve problems/present solutions in a consistent, well developed manner.

*Keywords:* graduate business education, integrated learning theories, applied learning

### **INTRODUCTION**

The value of applied learning is undeniable. While 80% of employers believe that applied learning is important for college graduates, only 23% of employers believe that college graduates are prepared to do so (Employers value applied learning, 2015). However, applied learning often takes the form of learning from cases and reading about experiences and situations of other individuals in corporations. While these are informative and interesting, as well as an important part of classroom learning, the authors of this paper propose that applied learning is, ultimately, most effective when students apply their personal experiences to engage concepts and models from their educational programs. During the process of applying direct experience, students comprehend and analyze cases that describe specific, highly contextualized situations. Engagement, commitment, and meaning making on the part of students become key to knowledge transfer, motivation, and student comprehension.

A significant problem is the gap between academia and real-world practices has not been reduced (Cohen, 2007). Skipton and Furey (2017) lament the lack of advancement in critical thinking after four years of college in many business undergraduate students. They decry the use of management “theories” and propose that they are not truly theories but only a means of providing structure to knowledge which can assist in developing understanding for students. However, students believe theories can be applied to practice; consequently, they have really learned how to learn/apply doctrine instead (Skipton and Furey, 2017). Skipton and Furey (2017), instead, propose that schools of business in universities must focus more on engaging students in real world events that are situationally relevant to improve student learning.

Similarly, Muff (2010) questions the relevance of current business school curricula, where managers must work with collaborative solutions to solve complex problems in equally complex

social environments. Muff (2010) emphasizes the need for experiential learning that must serve as the basis for reflection and critical thinking if we are to enable effective learning about management (Kolb, 1976).

As part of case analysis in graduate education, students often work with cases in situations that are not relevant to their current situations, and the authors of this paper suggest that engagement, commitment and meaning-making are lacking in this approach. Part of educators' responsibilities is to bridge the gap between academics and real-life for students. For adult learners who want to apply what has been learned immediately, it's difficult to do with the typical case study, because the case is often irrelevant to a student's career, organization, or industry. Generic theories do not address the individual eccentricities of each organization, and every organization is unique.

The purpose of this paper is to present teaching methods from courses in an online Master of Science in Management (MSM) Leadership program which use student experiences in varied industries, non-profits, and government as the basis for course projects. These assignments, along with student feedback, demonstrate the value of using students' realities to interpret and apply models from their own experiences, thereby enhancing how they understand leadership and work in their organizations.

This highly contextualized approach allows individuals to take leadership roles for resolving current organizational issues. This paper is grounded in a recommendation to integrate learning theories, specifically for graduate students, as an approach to enhance critical thinking, engagement, knowledge transfer, and commitment to learning.

Theories to be integrated include: Knowles' (1970, 1984) concepts of andragogy, Kolb's (1984) approach to experiential learning, Brookfield's (1986) reflection as part of self-directed approaches to learning, situated learning, Constructivism (i.e., Prandini, Isler & Barthelmess, 2012; Merriam & Caraffella, 1991) and 'knowledge workers' (McGowan, Reid, & Styger, 2018; Kantor, 2000; Drucker, 1999). Integration provides a cohesive framework of instructional design and implementation. Issues are identified, theory and instructional activities are presented, and these are followed by discussion and conclusions.

## **Literature Review**

Economos (2014) suggests that graduate education needs to be improved and that teaching must become higher priority. However, there is a dearth of literature about educating graduate students, particularly focused on applied learning, case-based learning, and leadership. The preponderance of research literature available is focused around undergraduate learning (Benefer, 2007) and teaching in general.

When there is literature available, the Master of Business Administration (MBA) is usually the program that is addressed (Smith, 2007), which is presented as a management program. However, Smith (2007) proposes that a specialist approach, or "meta-management", requires a "...skilled and practical humanist able to offer meanings and value judgments on all levels" (p. 242). Smith proposes changes to graduate business curricula to accomplish this goal.

The authors of this paper agree with Smith (2007) and propose that submersion into a business situation which is already familiar to graduate students allows them to experience specific situations with a different perspective based on the models that are used in the program. Smith (2007) emphasized that understanding ‘what it is and how to do it’ provides a better management education program. Because academia and business have separated management from the mainstream of life through the use of theory and management ‘jargon’, we now must develop students who are able to integrate their knowledge back into the workplace.

### ***Integrated Adult Learning***

An integrated view of adult learning as presented by Yarborough (2018) proposed integrating the theories of Watson (behavior), Vygotsky (social development), Mezirow (1996) (critical reflection), and Dirkx (nurturing soul) as an effective way to support adult learners. As noted earlier, this paper takes a similar, but more extensive, approach by providing recommendations to integrate learning theories specifically for graduate students by identifying the intersectionality of concepts to include those proposed by Knowles (1970, 1984), Kolb (1984), Brookfield (1986), Mezirow (1996), Constructivism (Prandini, et al, 2012), Situated learning (Prandini, Isler & Barthelme, 2012), and ‘knowledge workers’ (McGowan, Reid and Styger, 2018), which was a term that was first introduced by Peter Drucker (1967) and revisited by Kanter (1990; Knowledge Workers, 2000).

### ***Andragogy***

Knowles (1970, 1984) defined adult learners through five assumptions about adult learners. The assumptions later became known as the principles of adult learning and include: The learner 1) has an increasing level of self-responsibility for directing learning behavior, 2) has a body of experiential knowledge that is an essential resource for learning, 3) is ready to learn when the learner encounters new social or life roles, 4) wants to apply learning to new problems immediately, and 5) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2012) added a sixth principle: The learner needs to know what, why, and how, further supported by Mews, (2020). The principles create a core framework for understanding adult learning rather than adult education, a distinction that is notably addressed by Knowles et al. (2012) Androgological assumptions include a need for pedagogy (Knowles, 1980), because pedagogy may be appropriate when the learner is 1) in a content area in which they have no experience and do not perceive a relationship, 2) have no internal drive to learn more, 3) or must sustain a certain level of understanding of the subject matter.

Kenner and Wienerman (2011) emphasize the need for applications of andragogy, because integration into the academic environment is a challenge for adult students. Some of these adults are returning veterans. Others have determined that additional education is necessary for career advancement. They have likely experienced success in nonacademic lives and are expecting to be successful as they turn to colleges/universities for additional education.

While there are critics of andragogy, there is no doubt about the differences that it seeks to address between adult learners and child learners. Adults have life experience (Mews, 2020) that

continuously inform their learning decisions, many adults prefer autonomy and self-direction over a teacher-directed approach, and adult learners seek to solve problems to meet existential demands.

### *Self-directed learning*

Merriam and Cafferella (1991) remind us that self-directed learning has developed as an important area of research. They explain that this form of study occurs when individuals take the initiative to plan, conduct and carry out their own learning activities without the help of others, to include evaluation. Although this process has been described as linear and one that mirrors a formal instructional process, other studies have demonstrated that numerous and various strategies are employed when adults learn on their own (Merriam & Cafferella, 1991).

### *Constructivism*

Huang (2002) explains constructivism as learners who construct new knowledge and learn actively based on prior knowledge. As a theory of learning, constructivism posits that each individual perceives a different reality based on experiences, culture, and educational backgrounds. Constructivism interprets learning as an active, social, self-directed and constructive process.

Whereas specific knowledge may be challenging to transfer from one person to others, when students actively participate to generate knowledge, they also develop core competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, and analysis. By using personal experiences and applying them to models, a “flipped approach”, a more meaningful and useful approach to learning, arises. This supports motivation and increases engagement, as well as supporting self-directed learning, a requirement for many graduate studies.

For adult learners, moving into a graduate program is more demanding than earlier programs, and some students have doubts about their abilities. Stein, Wanstreet, & Calvin (2009) suggest that adults may not know how to construct knowledge in an online environment, and this can impact graduate education, because so many programs are offered online in a blended format which combines online and traditional face-to-face interactions.

Graduate learning, initially, allows adults to explore expectations and time management as well as self-direction and self-management, all important factors in successful graduate education. At the same time, this requires the need for responses and feedback (Espasa & Meneses, 2010); therefore, a facilitator plays multiple roles (Huang, 2002) such as mentor, coach, and provider of meaningful and timely feedback. Facilitating will include critical reflection in the process, because critical reflection promotes and includes critical thinking (Brookfield, 1986; Popper, (2005); Stein, Wanstreet & Calvin (2009).

### *Experiential Learning*

Experiential learning, as proposed by Kolb (1984, 2015), proposes that learning is based on life events which include concrete experience to analyze and reflect what is practiced with ongoing experimentation. Kolb’s (1984, 2015) work is grounded in the earlier works of Dewey (1938), Lewin and Gold (1999), and Piaget (1972) and is presented as an alternative to cognitive models

of learning. He posits that experience, cognition, perception, and behavior, taken together, provide a holistic approach to learning. Experiential learning theory is a constructivist approach and contains six core propositions:

- 1) Learning is a process rather than an outcome.
- 2) All learning is relearning.
- 3) Learning requires resolution of conflict.
- 4) Learning is a holistic process of adaptation.
- 5) Learning is the result of synergetic transactions between person and environment.
- 6) Learning is the result of creating knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.194).

Brookfield (1986) emphasizes a self-directed approach to learning, as well, and notes the importance of experiential learning and critical reflection. Huang (2002) notes similarities in the constructivist approach with Knowles' concept of andragogy, as adults bring unique experiences and characteristics with them, thus allowing variances in the workplace to be a key element in experiential learning. Adults analyze past experiences and align these with theory and models in the context of the graduate program.

### *Situated Learning*

Prandini et al. (2012) support situated learning as part of the constructivist learning environment which allows students to construct appropriate skills, knowledge, and attitudes to create sustainable environments. In situated learning, meaning is created from daily activities (Situated Learning, n.d.). This constructivist concept is represented by The Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). This includes, but is not limited to, content, outcomes, learning processes and a normative basis consisting of shared values and ongoing “metacognitive reflection” of the specific content (p. 18). Situated learning is encouraged as part of experiential learning. The authors identify a need for “greater use of experiential learning techniques - exposing people directly to the situation...” (Wilson, Lenssen & Hind, 2006, p. 37, as cited by Prandini, et al., 2012, p. 19-20). This provides a powerful learning experience as well as the opportunity to experiment and reflect.

### *Reflection*

Brookfield (1995) includes reflection and reflective exercises as part of the constructivist approach, in which adult students analyze, identify and relate course concepts to personal experiences. Economos (2014) explains how graduate business student perceptions of reflection are met with skepticism, resulting in student disengagement, because they believe reflection is a waste of time and irrelevant. Professors believe reflected practices are a waste of time because of the lack of a direct connection to student outcomes.

However, the practice of reflection contributes to deep learning and is considered part of transformational teaching (Mezirow, 1996). Deep learning requires a significant, explicit connection between students and information (Economos, 2014). This happens when opportunities are provided for students to construct meaning using problem-solving skills that require connecting concepts. Deep learning also reflects internal motivation and desire to understand while developing

independent thinking. Therefore, transitioning from a lecture-based learning system in favor of more learner-centered and collaborative approaches enhances student learning (Economos, 2014).

This transformational teaching approach provides a framework for students. This approach is also positively associated with increased student motivation and intellectual stimulation (Economos, 2014). Students who are engaged in the course and the learning activities proactively integrate and apply new knowledge.

Morgan, Rawlinson and Weaver (2006) suggest that the more time adults spend reflecting, the more they may recognize their own achievements, and this carries over to the workplace. Their research demonstrates that learners reflect more, manage their own learning more consistently, and recognize their achievements, all through increased levels of engagement.

### *Meaning Making*

Meaning is a relationship between an event and the reaction of the individual to that event. Meaning making, the learning and teaching process, and the theory of meaning-making is attributed to Kegan (1998, as cited in Ignelzi, 2000). The three fundamental concepts regarding how meaning making occurs are 1) humans actively construct their own reality; 2) meaning-making develops over time and with experience; and 3) the process of learning and teaching is strongly influenced by the way participants make meaning (Kegan, 1998; Ignelzi, 2000, pp. 5-6). Meaning-making supplements learning theory, supporting the different approaches to learning theory by providing interpretations of existing knowledge, understanding, and sense-making in content areas to relate curriculum to daily activities in the workplace (Knowles, 1990).

### *Knowledge Management and Knowledge Workers*

Kanter (2000) described knowledge workers as expecting increased autonomy, reliant on voluntary behavior, and at the forefront of a new style of work. Knowledge workers need conditions where they feel trusted and can use their knowledge to help customers. Such workers require loose structures and flexible systems with less hierarchy and more opportunity. McGowan, Reid and Styger (2018) address constructivist theory about knowledge workers. The concept of knowledge workers (Drucker, 1959) and knowledge worker use is relative to economic development. However, the economy is far different now than it was in the 1950s. The term “knowledge worker” has evolved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. McGowan et al. (2018) identify 11 different characteristics of 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge workers. Some of these characteristics include high skill levels such as from education and abstract reasoning, the ability to create new knowledge from existing knowledge, need to use a high level of knowledge and information in their day-to-day activities to complete tasks, and often do not conform to a set of rules.

McGowan et al. (2018) indicate that knowledge workers follow an enhancement process that follows three basic stages. The first stage includes the ability to bring together different types of knowledge and information toward finding that which is most relevant to their needs and purpose in a given situation (which can also be changing frequently). During the second stage, knowledge workers come to understand that simply acquiring information is not enough. They understand that information must be actively applied. In the third stage, after knowledge workers have actively

sought out/discovered information, applied the information, discussed, and embedded what they have learned, they share their knowledge, understanding and information with others, because they believe others will benefit. This follows a similar and time-honored process of older people teaching younger people and is a consistent role for knowledge workers when they convey knowledge to others.

In graduate education, constructivism has the potential for bringing many different work and life experiences into the classroom because the personal experiences many students already have when they are returning to obtain or complete graduate degrees contributes to learning. Many have worked in organizational and business environments following completion of undergraduate degrees, to include military careers. Many have, also, already experienced management and leadership situations which can be brought to bear in the context of the MSM program and used for applied learning.

The authors of this paper propose that this is accomplished less effectively in many graduate programs, because there is high reliance on cases that relate poorly to student context/experience. As a result, the authors propose that using the work experiences of graduate students in direct application of learning can provide a more engaged, motivated, meaningful and significant learning experience. Graduate students apply what they learn on a daily and weekly basis at their place of employment and use their situations and experiences as sources to analyze models and develop improvement plans. The purpose of this paper is to review how discussions and other activities, e.g. writing assignments, are developed using student experiences, and how this is accomplished in a graduate business program as part of the standard curriculum.

## **Teaching Methods**

Lee, Lee, Liu, Bonk & Magjuka (2009) consider case-based learning to be a substantial contribution for instructing online MBA students, and acknowledge that case-based learning provides real-world application, thus enhancing knowledge transfer. As noted earlier, cases used are frequently hypothetical or based on a previous real-life situation in another organization. This industry collaboration is not new, and indeed, has been used for many years, based on personal communications between these authors and faculty members at other institutions. Plewa and Questor (2006) propose another innovative approach where students develop cases in graduate marketing within any postgraduate (master) level course. In this case, methods may assume different forms and purposes, such as pre-written cases, live or client cases, client projects, or the case development approach to selecting a topic of their choice and developing a case from that topic.

## ***Applied Case Learning***

The classes used as exemplars for this paper share several characteristics. These are core classes in an online MSM curriculum, they are taught only by full faculty members (most ranked as Professor), they are taught through weekly modules that require students to read, watch, and deliver course materials on a regular schedule, and they are designed as templates, whereby instructors can add to the original, standardized content but cannot remove any of the original

template content. These courses have dedicated faculty members, such that there is little churn in the approach to teaching the courses.

The courses have been taught primarily in domestic sites but have also been used internationally. The university is a traditional university with a well-developed (early mover) online presence located in the southeast United States. The courses are taught through the college of business which is accredited by AACSB. The students in the graduate program are, primarily, fully employed adults. Unemployed students are rare. Student ages currently range from 23-64 years. Active military students regularly account for 25-30% of enrollments. The student body is extremely diverse and international, as captured in discussion boards about personal culture. Students have completed a minimum of three theory courses prior to beginning work in the application courses.

Table 1 provides a synopsis of the concepts/theories as applied in two graduate MSM - Leadership courses. There are multiple overlapping applications intended to reinforce learning, and these applications have similar constructs in the three courses discussed in this paper, so they are reinforced not only within specific courses, but between courses in the program. One critical element for the instructors is the frequent, direct, and purposeful participation in the discussion boards with the students. Through this effort instructors lead students into self-direction, self-management, reflection, application, and a deeper understanding based on their personal work experiences.

Table 1. Teaching and Learning Theories with Course Applications

<b>Author</b>	<b>Concept</b>	<b>MSM Quality Course Examples</b>	<b>MSM Change Course Examples</b>
Knowles (1970, 1984); Kenner & Weinerman (2011)	<p>Andragogy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing level of self-responsibility for directing</li> <li>• possesses experiential knowledge</li> <li>• motivation driven by changing tasks and problems</li> <li>• desire to acquire knowledge necessary to deal with the changes</li> </ul>	<p>Courses are established with andragogy as a foundation, knowledge gained from experience is applied. Integrates systems theory, diagnostic models, Baldrige Framework (MBNQA Criteria), SWOT and implementation</p>	<p>Independent research is the basis for all course work. The text is one source of many used in this course.</p> <p>Practice case for writing a planned change initiative. This process and vocabulary are new to virtually all students.</p> <p>A practice case for a proposed process improvement analysis is used.</p>

<p>Merriam and Cafferella (1991)</p>	<p>Self-directed learning</p>	<p>Selecting problems from current work environments to identify, analyze, and make recommendations for improvement</p>	<p>All materials are available throughout the course.</p> <p>Students choose individual projects.</p>
<p>Kosnick, Tingle &amp; Blanton (2013); Kolb (1984, 2005); Ferguson, Makarem &amp; Jones (2010)</p>	<p>Experiential Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• uses concrete experience to analyze and reflect</li> <li>• uses ongoing experimentation based on experience and knowledge</li> <li>• Course instructors are mentoring, coaching, and providing meaningful and timely feedback</li> <li>• critical reflection</li> </ul>	<p>Concrete experiences are the student work experiences. Ongoing experimentation includes applying course concepts to the major (final) course organizational proposal.</p> <p>Reflection and discussion boards, feedback on writing assignments; team case for practice and major individual final project; team case practice</p>	<p>TED Talks are used to support lectures. This expands course lectures to Subject Matter Experts as mentors and coaches. Relieves boredom.</p> <p>Active communication requirement in discussion boards. Students must respond to each other as well as any questions from the instructor.</p> <p>Two change initiative cases for an organization currently in operations. These cases are practice for the final case.</p> <p>Students propose a process improvement for their workplace or other organization.</p>
<p>Liu &amp; Chen (2010); Huang, 2002</p>	<p>Constructivism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem-based teaching</li> <li>• allow students to construct appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes to create sustainable environments</li> </ul>	<p>Students interact on the discussion boards by explaining the concepts in terms of their industries and occupations, guided by questions and inquiries from the instructor which they are expected to answer, as well as questions from others. Apply models to work situations,</p>	<p>Required approach to third case: a current and real problem must be the reason for the plan. Includes background and introduction to the problem as well as setting assumptions to guide the plan.</p> <p>The process improvement proposal requires the same –</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• problem-based teaching</li> </ul> <p>Self-managed, self-directed, time management</p>	<p>process improvement, measures, and create a continuous improvement loop</p>	<p>background, introduction, and assumptions.</p>
Prandini et al. (2012)	<p>Situated learning</p> <p>Increase use of experiential learning techniques because they are more powerful and more challenging</p>	<p>Team and final writing assignments and discussion boards are based on application of course concepts to current or previous positions.</p>	<p>Final case project is a real time, real world project, designed to be implemented and evaluated immediately.</p>
Brookfield (1986); Popper, (2005); Stein, Wanstreet & Calvin (2009)	<p>Reflection and reflective exercises -</p> <p>Critical reflection promotes critical thinking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• analyze, identify and relate core concepts to personal experiences</li> <li>• self-directed, self-managed</li> </ul>	<p>Used every week in the discussion boards to reflect on how it applies to their situation, what it means for them, and what they can do with the information (integrate, apply, reflect). Instructor involvement with every discussion; provides extensive feedback on written assignments; instructor availability throughout the entire course.</p>	<p>Discussion Boards over course concepts, require students to explicate concepts. EX: Culture analysis of family, church, work, or university program using two different approaches to culture.</p> <p>Every written exercise is a critical thinking opportunity. Rote recitation of facts is unacceptable.</p>
Kegan (1994); Ignelzi, 2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meaning making</li> </ul> <p>Tenants: 1) humans actively construct their own reality; 2) meaning making develops over time and experience; 3) process of learning and teaching is strongly influenced by the way participants make meaning</p>	<p>Reflection and critical thinking in written assignments, discussion boards, and instructor interaction; business proposal for a process improvement in their workplace; co-construction with peers in team assignments; business process improvement proposal</p>	<p>Change initiative plan for current employer. This is an extensive piece of work that requires deep critical thinking.</p> <p>Discussion responses to each other.</p> <p>Process improvement plan for current employer is proposed.</p>

<p>MacGowan, Reid &amp; Styger (2018); Kantor (2000)</p>	<p>Knowledge workers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>bring together different types of knowledge &amp; information most relevant to their needs and purpose in a given situation</li> </ul> <p>3 stages: 1) bring together knowledge and information, 2) understand simple acquisition of knowledge is not enough, it must be applied, 3) third stage is to apply the information - discuss, embed, and share</p>	<p>Integrates with andragogy, constructivism, and experiential learning.</p> <p>Business case proposal with an executive summary, analysis, recommendations, implementation, and evaluation with measures</p>	<p>Lectures provide instructions and a framework for the coursework of writing planned change initiatives.</p> <p>Students develop high skills in presentation, analysis, recommendation, implementation, and evaluation of real-world, existing problems.</p>
<p>Espasa &amp; Meneses (2009)</p>	<p>Feedback process as a key element in a teacher's role</p>	<p>Instructor involvement in every discussion, providing extensive feedback to writing assignments usually within 5 days or less; instructor availability throughout the course</p>	<p>Explicit feedback for each case (Ex: "Do this, not that.") is provided 1-5 days following submission deadline for all cases.</p>

## DISCUSSION

Adult learners, often seen as employed students, bring life experiences that can be used as the foundation for academic success. (Fede, Gorman, & Cimini, 2018) Although Kenner and Weinerman (2011) focus on entry-level adult learners in college, there are many similarities with adult learners in graduate school.

Adults have significant practical workplace knowledge which can be leveraged to enhance academic knowledge and skills, and they frequently develop learning strategies from this practical knowledge which have been successful in their careers (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). When these skills can be applied in a course, they develop confidence and capability. This is accomplished by integrating their professional knowledge, experience and capabilities into an academic setting. This requires that instructors explore different ways to examine and integrate this information into course activities.

By using students' organizational knowledge to provide examples, critical thinking is required to apply models retroactively to events in their organizations. In the MSM program, this is accomplished by requiring students to examine work processes, situations and events relative to the course content, including discussion boards and assignments. One of the major benefits from this approach is that students are exposed to many different occupations and industries with examples of model and theory application, practical experience, and outcomes from all of the class members, all in a professional and friendly environment.

By creating material within their personal frameworks, students have a direct connection to their current work responsibilities as well as their academic goals. Additionally, the learning tools, such as diagnostic tools, are easily adapted to meet individual work situations, even allowing students to take what they learn in a course in one week and apply it the next week in a professional setting. Students frequently use discussion boards to share how they were able to make suggestions at work or apply specific models. This approach generates excitement, engagement, and interest in learning more.

An effective way to simplify complex tasks is by creating components (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). This is achieved with separate learning modules and linked content with increasing complexity throughout the course of the program, such that content is found in multiple courses, not only as reinforcement, but also as knowledge that can be applied eventually in more complex assignments. This is accomplished in the MSM program through weekly modules, assignments for individuals and teams that require component completion, which then accumulates to provide a comprehensive assignment.

Kenner and Weinerman (2011) also suggest that the metacognitive strategies already developed by adult learners can make them resistant to change, and, therefore, repetition is critical when learning new strategies and new approaches. In the MSM program, numerous key concepts and models are introduced early in the program, e.g. leadership theory, organizational theory, and tools for organizational diagnostics including gap analysis, and strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threat models (SWOT), which are then repeated and used in successive courses, again, reinforcing increased complexity and knowledge transfer/application.

Student comments and evaluations over the past five years have been extremely positive and often excited. Comments are often unsolicited and are found in personal communications with instructors or through other students as well as course evaluations. Many students have identified the linking of concepts, the "daisy chained" courses, over the program and the benefits of repetition as a primary strength of the program. Other comments include the acknowledgment that concepts learned are extremely relevant in their own workplaces and in their environments, regardless of the industry.

Comments also reiterate how they learned things that they did not know they needed, identified gaps in their knowledge, and identified opportunities to engage in application, techniques, and frameworks that they did not know existed. Others comment about how they are looking forward to applying what they have learned about processes, leadership, and models to their organizations, and finding ways to make improvements. Often this goes beyond a local office and is expanded to a regional or national level based on the students' positions in the organization and industry.

Through active military students, numerous projects have been applied that have changed the way the military services approach, identify, improve and measure processes.

Others acknowledge how they have learned many new topics that they did not know existed, and how they have developed a much deeper understanding of the topics they thought they knew. Students also discuss how topics and concepts apply at work, as well as how they appreciate hearing about other work examples, so they can see how situations can have an impact on implementation and approach.

As applied case studies developed by the students themselves, these learning projects provide powerful opportunities for students that include immediate and direct application to work situations, leadership opportunities, application of theories and models, and opportunities for career enhancement. Kosnick, Tingle and Blanton (2013) identified the academic value, professional value and moral value of such projects in connection with AACSB standards (2017).

While much has been reported about the benefits for students, the benefits for instructors and the university are also notable. These projects are designed by the students to address specific issues in their own organizations and clearly provide transformational learning. For the instructor and university, impact with employers is notable and documentable. Impact is demonstrated in a wide variety of industries, levels of responsibility, and experiences.

## CONCLUSION

These are challenging times for higher education, and there is no greater challenge than finding creative and engaging ways to educate graduate students who are preparing to be society's leaders. While lecture classes continue to populate the majority of time slots on university course schedules, this paper provides significant evidence that alternative teaching methods are effective for meeting the many demands for improvement of graduate education. These methods provide powerful opportunities for both students and universities to improve student learning outcomes while achieving higher satisfaction and stronger relationships with students and employers.

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