

Roundtable report:
**The Future of
Experiential Learning**

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The Future of Experiential Learning

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- Bryan Andriano, George Washington University
- Michellana Jester, MIT Sloan School of Management
- Kerry Laufer, Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth
- Shannon McKeen, LEPE and University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
- Loredana Padurean, Asia School of Business

Participants

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- Rebecca Bellinger, University of Maryland Robert H. Smith School of Business
- Fabian Dulce, Universidad de la Sabana
- Sarina Eckhard-Gludovatz, WU (Vienna University of Economics and Business)
- Naglaa Fawzy, American University in Cairo (AUC)
- Tom Hunsaker, Thunderbird School of Global Management
- Pravat Surya Kar, Goa Institute of Management
- Bindu Kulkarni, S.P. Jain Institute of Management & Research
- Jordan Novak. Capsim, DePaul University
- Catherine Pereira Villa, Universidad de La Sabana
- Hatem Masri, University of Bahrain
- Randall Sawyer, University of Maryland Robert H. Smith School of Business
- Guy Pfeffermann. Management Skills for Wildlife Conservation
- Gilberto Sarfati, FGV EAESP | FGV Sao Paulo School of Business Administration
- Yasmin Yehia, American University in Cairo
- Aditya Singh, Athena School of Management
- Carolina Velásquez, Universidad de La Sabana
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- Sangeeta Menon Matu. Asia School of Business
- Tashina Giraud, KEDGE Business School
- Cecilia Sanchez, University of Miami Herbert Business School

Introduction

Experiential learning has been a central and expanding part of what business schools do. Students and companies count on the experiences and have been willing to pay premia for them. Unfortunately, travel and social distancing restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have prevented the vast major of experiential programs from being delivered in 2020. Nobody knows how long the restrictions will last, and that has created an “innovation imperative” for the people who lead experiential learning programs. How can business schools continue to provide the kind of transformative learning experiences that have become an essential part of the value proposition of business schools?

Twenty-six leaders from 22 business schools in 9 countries came together to consider “the future of experiential learning.” The roundtable meetings were led by Andrew Allen (Gies College of Business, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and LX Consortium), Bryan Andriano (George Washington University), Michellana Jester (MIT Sloan School of Management), Kerry Laufer (Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth), Shannon McKeen (LEPE and University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), and Loredana Padurean (Asia School of Business).

Roundtable participants met virtually for a total of three hours across two days in October, 2020. This report summarizes their discussions and serves as a vehicle for sharing the insights and opportunities that emerged. It is not intended as a comprehensive research study or meant to be authoritative. Any errors are the responsibility of its lead author, Dan LeClair, and should not be attributed to GBSN or the roundtable participants and its leaders.



What is included as experiential learning?

A wide range of activities are typically included under the umbrella of experiential learning. Among the most common are company-based projects, internships, working with community organizations, team competitions, simulations, and apprenticeship programs. External visits to companies and global immersion programs for study or work are sometimes included by schools. Project-based learning, whether for private sector companies or community-based non-profits, occupied a large part of the conversation. In a pre-roundtable survey, all of the participants included such programs in their portfolio of experiential learning programs.

Participants in the roundtable are rightfully proud of their programs, which have increased in importance and scale. Some newer schools, such as the Asia School of Business (ASB) in Malaysia and Athena School of Management in India were founded with experiential learning as a main pillar. Despite only being five years old, ASB has collected international awards for their action-learning program, which requires MBA students to engage in projects each of their five semesters.

The value of experiential learning

Nearly all the participants talked about expansion plans. The Gies College of Business is doubling the number of students participating in project-based learning annually from 1,000 to 2,000. At Thunderbird, the elective projects of the Global Challenge Lab will become compulsory. Others are leveraging the success of experiential learning in MBA education to provide similar programs for undergraduates or executive education learners. According to Jordan Novak of Capsim, an industry leader in providing simulations for business education, many schools are exploring experiential learning options for core undergraduate courses not normally known to include such activities.

There are other indicators of the rising value of experiential learning to business schools. Loredana Padurean of the Asia School of Business says that 85% of their MBA applications are motivated by their action-learning program. In France where business education is available for free, students have been willing to pay a premium for programs at KEDGE Business School largely because of the diverse range of experiential learning opportunities. Indeed, with business and management content widely available for free through MOOCs and micro-learning modules, business schools have been investing in transformational experiential activities in order to differentiate themselves.

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According to participants, the value of experiential learning derives largely from the learning it generates, especially because it allows for the application of concepts in context and the development of so-called soft skills such as critical thinking and communication which are increasingly important. Value is also generated by building relationships and social capital. Experiential learning is also adaptable to learners and their circumstances, according to roundtable participant Guy Pfeffermann, the founder of GBSN and Management Skills for Wildlife Conservation. He has experienced some success with experiential learning programs for women in wildlife conservancies in East Africa. On the other side of the equation, the increasing pace of change in business has increased the value to companies of engaging ambitious students by creating a steady stream of new problems to address.

The challenges of growing experiential learning

Growth in experiential learning is not without challenges. First, expansion does not always come with additional resources. Experiential learning normally requires a dedicated and experienced support team. Project-based learning, for example, requires

effort to prepare companies to engage students, with the bulk of the effort taking place even before teams arrive onsite. And there is an incredible amount of work on the back end of experiences to facilitate reflection and learning.


Second, experiential learning professionals are under constant pressure to increase the value of experiential learning to students and companies. It is hard enough to maintain consistency across

the experiences—to ensure that they are relevant, meaningful, and enjoyable, as well as effective for students. And, as emphasized by roundtable leader, Shannon McKeen, experiences must also be useful to the companies that participate.

As the volume rises, it becomes increasingly difficult to provide consistently high quality for both students and companies.

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Third, experiential learning leaders have been seeking new and better ways to measure the value of their programs and articulate that value to learners, company partners, and the communities they serve. The specific outcomes of experiential activities are often

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hard to pinpoint and can be unpredictable. It is easier to measure the volume and service quality of experience learning and harder to assess the learning and impact.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a sense of urgency across all three challenges. Travel restrictions, office closures, and social distancing have limited projects that require onsite visits and international travel. Many

internships were cancelled or modified (e.g., shortened) as companies had to move quickly to adapt and, in many cases, lay off or furlough workers. And it remains unclear how long the pandemic, associated restrictions, and economic downturn will last.

The innovation imperative

When COVID-19 hit the US, roundtable leader Michellana Jester recalls saying to her colleagues at MIT Sloan, “Everything is on the table—we have an opportunity to rethink everything.” It has been eight months since the shut downs began, and roundtable participants say their biggest challenge has been to innovate quickly to provide as much value to students and companies as possible.

Many schools moved as much as possible online, allowing students to work remotely when feasible for the companies. Fortunately, moving online has worked fairly well, perhaps because everyone, in business and academia, has been “in the same boat” working virtually. It is how managerial work everywhere is getting done. Schools have also reminded students that there are societal benefits from the shutdown, including reduced carbon emissions. However, with no clear end to the pandemic in sight, schools have been seeking new ways of providing transformational experiences.

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As roundtable participants shared their responses to the innovation challenge, several themes began to emerge.

1. *Aim for shorter, more frequent and diverse, experiences.* Instead of a single three-month internship, allow for three one-month virtual internships with three different companies, preferably in different industries and/or different countries. In general, the COVID-19 has accelerated the existing educational trend towards shorter programs and bite-sized modules. Many professors have also discovered that it is now easier to build a short experience around a visit from company executives to the virtual classroom.
2. *Enhance learning from digital experiences.* Leverage the opportunity to focus on building skills for virtual teams, which are growing in importance to companies. Help students to strengthen their learning agility, which enables them to apply previous experiences to future problems in completely different areas (i.e., increases the productivity of learning). One suggestion was to focus more on capturing learning from other experiences that students might normally have, with extra-curricular activities for example.
3. *Experiment with constantly improving technologies.* New features are being regularly added to virtual meeting platforms, such as Zoom. Helping students and companies to utilize the platforms and other, complementary, tools more effectively can improve outcomes. Some schools are exploring new ways improve matches between projects/internships and individuals and allow for mass personalization—high touch at scale. Roundtable leader, Andrew Allen suggested that technology can help expand a school's network of coaches and enable a concept he calls "mass coached learning."



4. *Consider virtual reality and augmented reality solutions as complements rather than substitutes for in-person experiences.* When travel finally resumes, schools will use VR and AR to prepare students prior to travel and make onsite experiences more meaningful over shorter periods of time. MIT Sloan has been looking at efforts by travel companies to reproduce locally-focused video into VR productions. Soon, inexpensive tools will enable professors to author their own VR and AR experiences for student and strengthen integration with course content.
5. *Leverage networks to collaborate.* Networks enable schools to do things collectively that they could not otherwise do on their own. GBSN, for example, is building a portfolio of international competitions and internship-like experiences to supplement the existing programs of member schools. Rebecca Bellinger of the Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland imagines a future with “open source” projects in which projects posted by a school are open to students from others. These kinds of collaborations are also seen as a way to build international diversity for teams working on local projects. Roundtable leader, Bryan Andriano of the George Washington University, is exploring projects in the rural communities surrounding the DC area, which could provide foreign and domestic students a richer understanding of the US, virtually, and still focus on building the trust and empathy across borders that is special to their program.
6. *Invest in faculty skills and tools.* Utilize the unprecedented opportunity to help faculty to build new skills. The rapid transition to online teaching has pressed faculty into learning quickly, though roundtable participants indicate that the digital skills of faculty are still quite underdeveloped for experiential learning. One idea is to provide faculty with tools and instruction for converting cases into experiences (e.g., simulations) that can be implemented online. GBSN has provided such an opportunity with its Faculty Simulation Development Lab in partnership with Capsim.
7. *Explore new types of assessments.* There have been interesting developments in the area of assessment, both at the individual and organizational levels. For example, there is growing interest in gamified assessments, which can assess individual traits and competencies. It would not be difficult to experiment with these types of assessment tools in the current environment. At the organizational level, schools are trying to measure the value of student projects to the companies and communities they serve. The Business School Impact Survey offered by EFMD is a tool that can help, as is the newly created Positive Impact Rating.

Overall, roundtable participants stressed the importance of being flexible and nimble in the current environment, as well as thinking holistically across the school and institution. For example, can we enhance disciplinary diversity by partnering with the engineering and policy schools? Roundtable leader, Kerry Laufer at the Tuck School of Business, also stressed the importance of being responsive to changes in the market.

By the end of roundtable discussions, participants began to view COVID-19 more as an accelerator and less as a disruptor.

And they want to continue the conversations.

The overall view was that the people in the roundtable are at the leading edge of the future of management education because of their work. The international diversity of the participants was especially helpful because it created opportunities to view the challenges from different perspectives. GBSN

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may support the ongoing dialogue through its learning communities initiative, which is designed not only to facilitate exchange of best practices, but also to enable resource sharing and support collective action.





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