



modes2learn

MULTI-MODAL EXECUTIVE LEARNING

Raymond Smith

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Gazing out from my airplane seat window looking down from 35,000 feet over the clouds above India, I was reflecting back on a series of meetings with a number of Indian and transnational companies based in India. I heard time and time again that, while they all hungered for the type of Executive Education that I was representing on behalf of my school, we were like all western schools -- too expensive, I even heard this from companies that were friends of the school. India is a fascinating and rapidly changing country of great consequence to the world's economy, signs of that growth are everywhere in the major cities of India and I heard the calls for help from them; help to develop leaders and managers to build the companies that will be the engines of this growth.

One computer services company that I visited grew its staff from 28,000 employees to 42,000 in one year and needed new managers to manage that growth and deliver the new business that they were winning. Like the others, this company needed high quality programs that would help their leaders and managers to be effective in this pattern of rapid growth at a price they could afford. But rapid growth meant that existing managers had little time to be away from work to study off the job. So the potential to work with India and other growing nations such as China meant that schools like mine had to find new ways of engaging with these new markets while meeting our own needs to grow and be a school of consequence in the world. This meant that we had to find new ways of thinking about how we design and deliver executive education.

So, I settled back into my seat with a pad on my knee to start thinking about what could be done. First, why are schools (such as mine) expensive to these markets? One answer is obvious; the salaries, living, and operational costs are much higher in the West than they are currently in India and other similar countries and there is not much to be done about that. The salary of an Indian business school professor is much lower than a professor in a U.S. business school; but it is the western perspective that was being sought by many of the companies that I spoke with. The problem stems from how we think about using our teaching resources, most teaching institutions are stuck in a live, face-to-face educator centric teaching experience. "Live and face-to-face" means that our educator has to be present with the students in a classroom somewhere, which means (in the case of India) that we need to fly our educator across the world to spend time in the classroom engaging the students in their learning. This requires time and cost, since most schools pay their educator for travel time, a rest day plus their teaching time. There is then a temptation to want to leverage this person further by extending their teaching time (since they are already there). However, this can end up skewing the program design and content away from the needs of the group towards the needs of managing costs.

There are other solutions that do not have the educator flying across the world to lead programs. For example, there are many e-learning packages and programs which reduce most or all of this travel-related cost. However, while e-learning has a valued place in the toolkits of training departments, this is not the model that we wanted to pursue as it typically does not offer the interactivity and dialogue amongst educators and participants that we and our clients value in the executive education experience. It seemed important to those I spoke with in the corporate world of India (and to us as a business school) to create a program that would be truly interactive, one with both synchronous and asynchronous learning and one in which there was a relationship and a dialogue between the participants and the educator. Therefore another solution needed to be created.

The place to start seemed to be in thinking about what actually happens in one of these typical executive education programs -- to deconstruct the experience. Most business schools and some learning providers follow a similar format. That is, the participants and the educator gather together in the same room away from their workplace and engage in a number of interactions and experiences led by the educator. For example, there will probably be lectures of varying length, team-based breakout sessions and report backs, experiential exercises, debate, cases, and so on. However, when looking at the social and political dynamics of what is actually happening in these various activities, we can see that they vary considerably. In the case of the lecture, the

educator is totally active and generally in control with the participants fairly passive in terms of behavior as they are listening and perhaps taking notes. The team-based exercises and cases typically offer a more democratic share of control with the educator setting up the activity and then the team engaging in dialogue with each other as they tackle the issue presented to them and then returning to the leadership of the educator during the debrief. Experiential exercises require the participants to fully engage in some form of role play or metaphorical exercise and then reflect upon what learning can be garnered from the experience and applied to their real situation. In this case, the educator is more of a facilitator than a leader. There are of course other methods employed, but these types are generally the ones most used. Here costs are associated with the educator and the participants being together in the same place at the same time (the opportunity costs of being away from work plus travel and hotel costs.)

Being away from the work place doesn't just present a cost issue but also a transfer of learning or relevance problem. Participants have to make the leap from theory to practice after the program is completed; experientially they also have to engage in role plays or metaphors as they are not in the real world of their work and relationships. This can also be a benefit as there is a lot to be said for creating a safe social lab in which to explore new practices and behaviors. Conversely, the real place to embed learning is in the real experience of the work situation with their varied cultures and purposes.

Having deconstructed a typical program, it's possible to reshape and change some of the rules of the game and at the same time reduces the cost of the program; better still, we can create a better program. Several questions arise. Does the educator need to be there all the time? Do the participants and do they always need to be together? Does all the learning need to be live and in the moment? And lastly, how can we get the learning closer to the work situation and still have the engagement and dialogue with the participants that we want in a way different to the e-learning approach?

HISTORY

The answer lies in part within the history and experience of Duke University's Fuqua School of Business (Duke) which has been delivering MBA programs globally to executives using a model of learning called "Place and Space" since 1996.

Duke recognized the power of the then nascent internet to bring people together from around the world and combined this with the more traditional approach to live, face-to-face classroom teaching to create what we called "Place and Space". In this phrase Place refers to learning together in the same place (classroom, hotel meeting area, etc.) and Space refers to teams learning together while distributed around the globe using the internet. Duke designed its own learning platform to enable teams and educators to learn together using a variety of online tools such as discussion boards, online cases, videos, web-conferencing, and chat. This platform has since evolved and is now in its 6th generation. Our MBA programs have grown in terms of reputation, ranking and the number of iterations. This has meant that Duke has learned to design and deliver high-quality executive education programs in this way.

Duke's educators are now expert in determining how their courses can be delivered in Place and Space. Duke's history, experience and enthusiasm for delivering this kind of learning provided a clue as to how we might think differently about the way traditional non-degree executive education programs are designed. Moreover, we now have available to us expert and forward thinking learning technologists and multimedia experts eager to develop new learning solutions which leverage the many new and emerging technologies which are becoming ubiquitous in the current technology and learning spaces. For example, consider the cell phone. It is no longer just a phone. In the case of the iPhone it is a small mobile computer with email, internet, video, phone and conference calling capabilities and becomes a very mobile learning delivery platform.

Web conferencing allows presentations, web browsing, interactive dialogue and white boards to be used in asynchronous visual ways. Telepresence systems (now offered by Cisco, Polycom, and other companies) create videoconference capabilities that allow the people using these systems to feel as though they are in the same room even though you may be 12,000 miles apart. Now we have virtual 3D worlds to explore like Second Life and ProtonMedia's enterprise-ready "Protosphere". Each of these technologies can be considered as modes of connection between people, and these modalities can be the means by which programs are delivered at lower cost across the world while offering interesting opportunities to deliver them in a better way than traditional methods.

NOTE: One other modality to include in this menu is face-to-face interactions in "Place" environments. This is still the most effective way to engage in real time with others. To personally greet senior leaders and share a meal or beverage with each other develops a sense of trust and comradeship with one's peer learners and educators.

DESIGN CHALLENGE

Yet two design challenges remained.

- (1) How do we leverage these modalities in a way that would reduce the cost of the training?
- (2) How can we create a great learning experience for all those concerned that will impact the management and leadership performance of those attending the program?

The solution lay in the interface between the different learning dynamics within the deconstructed program and the modalities available. This resulting model was Multi-Modal Executive Learning (MMEL). Simply put, Multi-Modal Executive Learning is a total system that creates an engaging learning environment which brings together various communication technologies with different aspects of the learning experience to reduce the time that participants spend away from their workplace while making more efficient use of educator time. It provides an environment that allows participants of the program to learn to reflect at their own pace. It also engages them in real-time dialogue and activities with educators and their peers that link theory directly to their work environment and challenges.

MULTI-MODAL ELEMENTS

Multi-Modal Executive Learning consists of the following modalities and learning connections:

- **Video podcasts.**
These are playable on an iPhone, video iPod, and PC or laptop computer. These video recordings of educators explaining the theories and tools of their content areas create a learning situation in which the educator is active and the participant fairly passive (listening and taking notes) These podcasts are between 25 and 40 minutes in duration and combine the educator talking with videos and flash presentations to illustrate the points they are making.. The result is a very engaging learning experience. These video podcasts can be accessed via a mobile device (iPhone, video iPod) to add mobility (the notion of learning in your pocket) there when you need it or just as well from a desktop computer or laptop. A course on leadership, for example, may be broken down into 6 or more such podcasts. These segments are then released one by one and can be viewed at a time suitable to the participants and at as many times as desired. Each podcast finishes with a *call to action* (more about this later).
- **Web conferences.**
These sessions are accessed via a PC or laptop using a product such as Centra or Interwise. Web conferences in the program typically run for an hour and involve the educator facilitating a conversation with teams of student participants who have been involved in working on their “calls for action” or on a team-based case. This is similar to the breakout session within a traditional live, face-to-face program. Web conferences are usually the means by which each topic area is introduced. NOTE: In the case of a company with a telepresence infrastructure, the live tag-up can be held via telepresence instead of web conference.
- **Discussion boards.**
These asynchronous sessions are usually accessed via the learning platform and offer the opportunity for teams and the entire learning cohort to engage in asynchronous conversation with each other and with the educator
- **Readings, videos, and cases.**
These resources are made available through the program’s learning platform to supplement the video podcasts and web conferencing sessions. Videos might be of senior management discussing the topic area from the company’s viewpoint or could be a movie that further illustrates the topic. These resources comprise the *virtual program library*.
- **Wikis.**
This Web 2.0 capability could be accessed via the learning platform and form the knowledge management support for the teams and overall cohort. The *Wiki space* can also augment the virtual program library.
- **Face-to-Face in Place.**
The more recognized modality. Here typically spent at the end or the middle of the program, the time spent in this mode is much reduced as most of the learning has already occurred via the other modalities. This mode should be very interactive and socially rich, using methods such as role plays, experiential learning, and interactive project simulations.
- **Future Modes.**
We are adding interactions in virtual environments and simulations which leverage interactive gaming. Here the participants will engage in a learning experience inside a virtual world in which they can join other virtual team members (avatars) to solve problems and run businesses in a safe and experimental environment. They can then later extrapolate their learning from that world to their real world

This menu of modalities provides a platform infrastructure which allows designers to think differently about program design and what elements are needed to meet the different program needs and desired learning outcomes. It also allows learning designers to match the modes of delivery against “types” of people. For example, some modes may be more suitable to extraverts

than to introvert types, this is true for the participants and for the educators. This approach allows us to invite the more introverted faculty to teach with their preferred style rather than impose and extravert style upon them and vice versa.

Although video podcasts and web conferencing remain a staple part of the design mix, it is important to us that our programs always include a live component to allow for active dialogue and a sense of relationship with the school and educators. We at Duke have produced a multi-modal program which is completely virtual in its delivery without a “face-to-face in place” modality. The key principles drawn upon in creating this new program concept are those of adult learning theory, experiential learning, and action learning.

The principles of adult learning tell us that adults learn best when they are engaged in the learning, when they can draw upon and share their own experiences, when they have some influence on the learning, and when the learning is of practical use to them in their work or life experiences. These new MMEL programs also follow the principles espoused by the writers such as Lewin and Kolb in their view of the value and practice of experiential learning. At the base of this model is a cycle (figure 1) with four core parts which can be developed further to make a more sophisticated model. The core elements are: (1) a real experience, (2) critically observing that experience, (3) reflecting on that experience to create insight and sense, and (4) developing new approaches to the experience for next time which set up the next concrete experience. The learner then continues through the process cycle again.

The calls for action are a part of each video podcast and ask the participants to engage either individually or as a part of a team in taking forward the concepts or tools discussed in the podcasts. Using their work experience and trying them out or making sense of a previous experience, they set up the concrete experience. The participants are asked to reflect critically about what happened as they applied these new models to their practice as they share them with the educator and their peers during the live web conferences or “face-to-face in space” events with a view to creating a shared meaning. As they make plans to adapt their practice in the future, they complete the cycle.

This approach reflects an important Duke value in learning design: learning is in the network of the entire community involved and the experiences and knowledge of everyone. The educator, participants and senior corporate leadership are all provided with the opportunity to make their contribution to the learning experience.

Multi-Modal Experiential Cycle

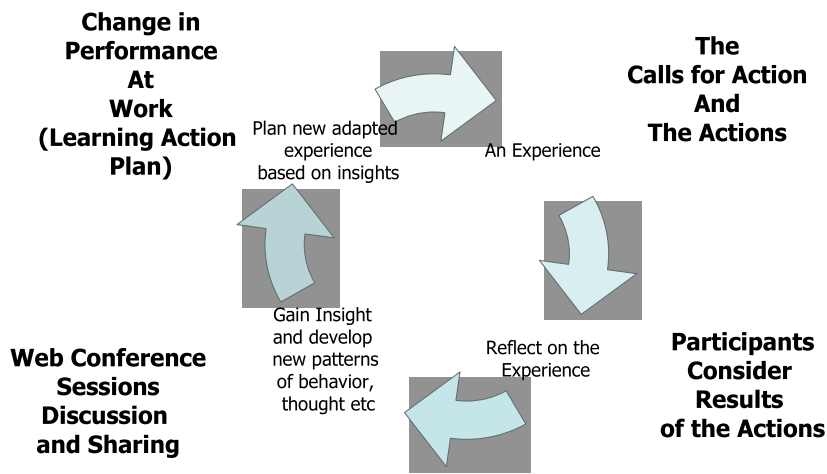


Figure 1

Learning contracts (Learning Action Plan) are built into the program at the start, intermediate, and end of the program. These contracts are typically an agreement between the participant, their manager and the learning organization promoting the program. These contracts are designed to obtain the commitment of all those involved in the learning life of the participant. This ensures that they take their learning and insights and apply them thoughtfully to their work challenges, thus aiding the transfer of learning from theory to practice and embedding the learning into the life of the participants.

The notion of *Action Learning* fits well into this model and may even be considered another mode of learning. Action Learning, first described and developed by Professor Reg. Revans, is often described as “Learning by Doing”. However, this description is too simplistic and not quite accurate. Action Learning involves teams of people solving real world problems by drawing on theories and models that already exist but doing so by questioning what they observe and experience and then challenging the basis for their interactions with each other and the problem at hand, eventually resulting in a problem to the solution that is then put into practice.

Action learning projects can form an underlying structure to a multi-modal program with the video podcasts and web conferencing and “face-to-face in place” modes used along the journey of the team as they solve the problem.

When thoughtfully combined, the modalities and the learning approaches form the basis of the multi-modal approach but would it solve the problem that I mused about at 35,000 feet above India? What follows is a brief case of a multi-modal program delivered in India.

SATYAM COMPUTER SERVICES

Sometime after my journey, we were contacted by Satyam Computer Services. Headquartered in Hyderabad, India, Satyam is a rapidly growing and highly successful companies which is expanding rapidly overseas (currently growing at 35% per year). Growing at such a phenomenal rate, they were always outgrowing their pool of management required to run this expanding company.

Another feature of Satyam is that they have a very real belief that all their associates are leaders at all stages of their career and they invest money and time to develop these leaders. We were asked if we could help them provide a Managerial Excellence Program (MEP) for their middle managers who at the time amounted to about 3,000 people. Satyam wanted the MEP program to be delivered 100% virtually and at a much reduced cost from our traditional programs. The multi-modal learning approach at this time was just a series of ideas on paper and some development of test materials. Duke needed somewhere to develop the model into a living program and Satyam needed a program like it delivered by a world class business school (vs. a training company).

The senior managers at the Satyam Learning Center were immediately intrigued by the multi-modal method and were willing to engage in developing the approach as a partner with Duke into a new first-of-a-kind program. They have since proved to be excellent partners in that process. Since its initial conception the model has been launched and delivered to 200 managers and we have learned much from that process together.

MEP consists of four courses: Managing People, Implementing Strategy (from a middle manager perspective), Managing Resources, and Managing Change. The Satyam Learning Center is responsible for recruiting 50 participants to each MEP cohort of learners program and each cohort is divided into two groups of 25. The program is delivered via Duke's Learning Platform on which are found documents describing the program and how to engage in it and all the learning materials (podcasts and other needed materials). The program starts with a live web conference led by Duke faculty, Satyam Learning Center managers, and all program participants. This kick-off event sets the scene and tone for the program by describing the role of the program in the context of Satyam's culture and business climate, an overview of the courses, how to access course materials, how to engage with the materials, the role of the web conferencing modality and associated calls for action, their role as learners, and the role of the faculty in the overall process.

Each course consists of six video podcasts preceded and concluded by a live web conference with 1-2 web conferences scheduled between the video podcasts. The podcasts are released one at a time to create a learning journey for the participants with each podcast setting the scene for the next. In the case of the first course (Managing People), an online 360-degree instrument is used and offered prior to program kick-off. This instrument is the underpinning and basis for the Managing People and Leading Change courses. The courses are supported by video podcasts of Satyam senior management discussing the course content from the point of view of Satyam's business and culture. Each of these Satyam podcasts are introduced by the educator leading the course.

At the end of the four courses each participant is asked to discuss with their manager their Learning Action Plan (LAP) and complete it in some detail for future application and learning. The LAP consists of four parts.

- What are my key learning take-aways from each of the courses?
- How am I going to further develop myself?
- How am I going to develop my team?
- In what ways am I going to improve my area of responsibility and how?

The LAP is agreed to by the two parties and submitted to the Satyam Learning Center for assessment. This together, with attendance statistics for the web conferencing sessions, is the basis for successfully completing the program.

The program was successfully delivered in a totally virtual environment at a lower cost than a typical program at Duke. This was achieved by delivering the program to 50 participants, by making the podcasts reusable for each cohort of 50, and by having the educators stay at home

rather than flying to India. Also, Satyam did not have to fly anyone anywhere thus reducing their costs further and keeping their people productive at work.

DUKE/SATYAM PARTNERSHIP

The success of the delivery was due to the strong partnership that Duke had with Satyam and how Satyam provided feedback in a positive way as a partner to help us get it right. Due to our experience with Place and Space, Duke has faculty and a learning technology function very eager to engage in developing this model and of collaborating with their partners at Satyam. To make this work, we had to find new ways of doing things -- from compensating faculty, handling intellectual property, and finding solutions (both pedagogic and technical) that we had not created before.

Evaluations and conversations with the participants have told us that the program from their point of view was very successful.

- 65% of the participants have already changed the way they work as a result of the program.
- The participants liked the ability to revisit the video podcasts and thought the length about right (although some wanted them to be longer) and thought them a useful way to learn
- The web conferences on the whole worked well and the participants enjoyed the live interaction with the faculty and the flexibility that they offered in terms of conversations. We did learn that we needed to create more structure to these live elements to make them work better.
- We needed to adapt to the Indian culture and how it impacted the web conferences.
- Most participants accessed the video podcasts during their mornings and afternoons rather than in the evening.
- The calls to action were seen as effective by the majority of those we spoke to.
- Some reported changing their practice while engaged in the learning, e.g. - while listening to the podcast, trying something out by making a change in their approach at work, and then returning to the podcast.
- Some reported that they preferred this method of learning to attending a traditional program as they learned while at work and saved time.
- We learned that we needed to provide more reading materials to augment the video elements and live sessions.
- Initially, there were technical problems with the web conferencing and sometimes with the download of the video podcasts due to bandwidth issues in India but these were overcome.
- Satyam recently won an award (Ranked number 1 of the 2007 BEST Awards) from the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD). Mr Rajul Asthana, VP of Satyam Learning Center, said that "the Duke program played a big part in their winning this award".
- We also found that the educators enjoyed working and learning in this way and felt it a good use of their time with minimal disruption to their lives. They also liked the opportunity to be creative with their materials and to use the style of teaching delivery that best met their strengths.

We have also delivered a multi-modal open enrollment program called "Leading Innovation and Change" which incorporates a face-to-face element and an innovation project that each participant develops as they go through the program. These open enrollment participants also enjoyed and valued the multi-modal approach. A US-based company also now integrates this approach into the middle of one of their traditional programs and is achieving a positive effect. There is still more to be learned about how this model connects with people from a wide range of cultures as well as people from different generational groups but we and our student participants to date are actively involved in their own multi-modal learning practice.

Back at the start of the article at 35,000 feet, I pondered whether we could meet the challenges of delivering our programs in countries such as India. We have learned that we can and are now

doing so quite successfully. Because the model makes sense for companies with busy and mobile managers and executives, we are also delivering MMEL programs on our U.S. doorstep at Duke. . We have a way to go still, but we now know that we can deliver interactive Duke Programs anywhere in the world at a more comfortable price point which positively impact the lives and the organizations that we work with.

I would like to thank Rajul Asthana, Pithamber Polsani, Renu Khanna, Kannan AM, Roli Seghal, Prasanth G Nair and their colleagues at Satyam Learning Center for all their help in making this virtual model a reality.

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