



THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL INTERACTION ON MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

Dr. Jayaashish Sethi

Director, MMIM, Maharishi Markandeshwar (Deemed to be University), Mulana-Ambala

ABSTRACT This paper explores the interactions among MBA students within virtual environments and investigates the reasons behind their inadequacies in practical skills. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities and institutions have fully adopted virtual interactions. This shift has led to students' inability to acquire essential hard skills crucial in the professional realm. MBA students, as potential entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs, are vital to the economic framework of a nation. This study employs a phenomenological research methodology, utilizing in-depth interviews to comprehend their experiences with virtual interactions. Two interviews were conducted with MBA professionals to gain insight into their experiences. The primary finding of this research indicates that virtual interactions have been particularly ineffective for students required to develop predominantly hard skills. In terms of implications, this study aids policymakers in grasping the consequences of virtual engagements. Disciplines requiring practical skills should refrain from virtual-only interactions; however, if necessary, a hybrid model could be adopted.

KEYWORDS : Management Education, Virtual Interaction, Practical Skills, ICT

INTRODUCTION

Virtual interaction involves communication, collaboration, and engagement through ICT tools. According to Dung (2020), it facilitates discussions and collaborations among students and teachers online, overcoming geographical and time barriers. Video conferencing tools often enable this interaction, also known as e-interaction (Bri et al., 2009). Virtual interaction includes real-time online communication and other dimensions. It is categorized into asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid types (Dung, 2020).

Asynchronous learning is non-real-time, with students engaging in self-directed tasks within a timeframe, using emails, blogs, or forums. Synchronous interaction allows concurrent communication on a virtual platform via audio and video.

Hybrid interaction, merging online and in-person elements, is common in higher education. For instance, the Graduate School of Education at TU uses video conferencing software and in-person sessions for major modules.

The need for virtual interaction surged with lockdowns in March 2020, evidenced by the rapid adoption of Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet. Many students experienced virtual interaction during the pandemic. This research explores business faculty students' experiences, pertinent to me as a student, lecturer, and in corporate recruitment.

Business education, integrating theory and practice, involves presentations, seminars, and skill development in areas like data analysis and negotiation. These skills are graded. Based on my experience with MBA, BBA, and BBS students, their curricula focus more on practical application. Although BBS programs were critiqued for being too theoretical, updates now emphasize practical skills. Thus, virtual interaction might not suit business students in MBA, BBA, or BBS, yet MBA students must develop interaction skills.

Despite limitations, virtual interaction has become effective in education. Its use increased significantly after COVID-19. ICT tools efficiently conduct classes via video conferencing (Dillenbourg et al., 2002). However, challenges remain, especially for students needing practical experience.

In line with the study's objectives, the research questions are: How do MBA students experience virtual interaction? How do MBA students in virtual mediums comprehend practical skills? The objectives are: to understand MBA students' virtual interaction experiences and to examine why they may lack practical skills. This research explores the experiences and perceptions of business students studying virtually. As virtual interaction rises in academic institutions, challenges accompany it. Earning a degree isn't solely an achievement; applying learned knowledge practically is essential. The study investigates how virtual interaction impacts MBA students' competency, aiding in correcting issues and assisting professionals addressing this academic challenge.

Problem Statement

Graduate students entering corporate sectors or banks lack essential skills for daily tasks, including presentation, data analysis, portfolio, security analysis, and soft skills like communication, negotiation, and decision-making. Virtual learning hasn't notably improved hard skills essential for professional settings (Ryan & Poole, 2019). Few studies address virtual learning for business students. During recruitment, candidates are screened on performance, projects, ECAs, and alma mater, appearing charismatic but failing in practice. There's a gap between CV projections and actual contributions. Consistent performance decline prompts investigations to identify and address issues. Many underperformers cite employment anxiety. For instance, while students learn sales and marketing concepts, inadequate practical exposure causes client anxiety. Traditionally, MBA students engage in mock sessions, creating and marketing products, enhancing real-world preparedness (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). Virtual learning fails to replicate these experiences. Some research on virtual interaction exists, but MBA-focused studies are lacking. Existing studies cover students from all disciplines, and this gap must be addressed as e-interaction evolves rapidly (Augar et al., 2004). Most studies consider e-interaction, which is not synonymous with virtual interaction. E-interaction involves asynchronous interaction without real-time teacher requirements, whereas virtual interaction occurs on a real-time platform.

Literature Review

Virtual interaction greatly benefits students continuing studies despite uncontrolled situations like geography or health issues (Dung, 2020). Virtual interaction is crucial for those unable to attend classes physically due to such conditions. The business field is demanding, and virtual platforms alone are insufficient (Mandell & Klein, 2009). Practical experience is necessary to develop hard skills; otherwise, graduates may be incompetent and face unemployment. Virtual interaction can help but won't meet rigorous professional standards. The corporate world values practical skills like finance and communication (Elmuti et al., 2005). Lack of these skills results from relying solely on virtual interaction. Virtual interaction offers benefits but also has limitations. Students can access knowledge globally, but it won't enhance holistic academic and professional growth, potentially weakening interpersonal and hard skills (Hay et al., 2004). MBA students need industry exposure (Chen et al., 2009). MBA students, as future business professionals, bear significant responsibilities and expectations. Continued virtual reliance may lead to incompetence due to unrealistic approaches.

During recruitment, candidates are screened based on their alma mater, projects, and ECAs, but a gap exists between CV claims and actual skills (Weinberg et al., 2011). After declining performance, they are questioned to identify issues and make corrections. McGloin and Geogeu (2015) argue candidates with expected strong performance often cite anxiety from employment. They might know sales and marketing principles but lack real-world sales exposure, causing fear in client interactions. Usually, in physical sales training, students create a product, make a slogan, and sell to customers (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). This exercise prepares them for the market, but virtual

settings fail to fully develop this skill.

Research Design and Methods

This study uses a phenomenological research method with in-depth interviews to explore experiences with virtual interaction. Two interviews were conducted with individuals familiar with virtual interaction from their MBA program in Bathinda. One participant is an MBA student currently learning virtually, while the other is an MBA graduate who completed her degree online and now works at a bank. Additionally, case studies on virtual interaction and the history and perceptions of virtual learning. After interviewing the MBA student, the content was transcribed and coded into 11 distinct codes, which were then grouped into themes such as "anxiety in front of classmates," "confusion during interpretation," "fear of feedback," "lack of vigilance during idea conveyance," and "irrational fear of arithmetic interpretation." To improve accuracy, these were refined into a new theme called "Ambiguity in Presenting." Similarly, the MBA graduate's interview was transcribed and resulted in 9 codes, generating themes like "skills help more than grades," "beyond expectations," "employability disruption," and "career threat," which were refined into "Grades are no Longer Helpful." Data is crucial for research, aiding in decision-making and understanding problems, which can lead to solutions. Identifying a problem is a significant step towards resolution. Data enhances understanding of the subject and improves research procedures, benefiting the structuring of methodologies and meeting requirements.

RESULTS

To effectively present the results, two distinct themes are established: one for current MBA students and another for MBA graduates who are now professionals. Developing these themes is crucial for accurately interpreting the data. This approach is necessary because one participant expressed concerns about the current situation as they are still a student, while another participant highlighted the impact of virtual interactions on their career as they are now a professional. This is illustrated as follows.

Ambiguity in Presenting

Despite the pandemic's end, virtual interaction persists in colleges, hindering students' acquisition of technical skills. An MBA student said, "I get confused interacting in person. I've done assignments with presentations, but struggle in physical settings." This suggests students excel online but become anxious in person. Reviewing attendance, many scheduled presenters were absent. The MBA coordinator revealed, "Students aren't used to face-to-face interaction; their courses were mostly online, making them reluctant." Presentation anxiety is common among university students (Eliot & Chong, 2005). It's disheartening that colleges focus more on profits than developing students' practical skills.

Grades Are No Longer Helpful

Virtual interaction enabled students to achieve good grades due to flexibility but is now deemed less instrumental. An MBA demands practical exposure, research-based learning, discussion, and case studies to develop problem-solving skills. Students are forced to memorize answers, inhibiting critical thinking. An MBA graduate shared: "Grades only show organizations potential worth. Practical work from day one involves hard skills not taught in virtual classes, like meeting clients, competitor analysis, and profit-loss evaluation." This statement highlights how virtual learning hasn't benefited recent graduates entering professions. Despite high grades, they struggle to perform well in their careers. Analyzing appraisal ratios of students with a 3.7+ GPA, most weren't promoted in their first employment year. The HR head noted: "There's a gap between CV claims and actual skills. Many graduates prefer working from home, which isn't feasible in our corporation." The extended transition during COVID has hindered learning hard skills (Fitzgerald & Konrad, 2021). In a generation valuing hard skills, the rise of graduates lacking these skills presents an adversity.

DISCUSSION

Based on interview results, participants claim virtual learning discourages constructivism and critical thinking. Constructivism, although effective, faces challenges even in physical settings. Issues with resource limitations are prominent due to a lack of qualified teachers. Constructivism extends beyond human resources, needing technological tools which may be unavailable. It also requires time-consuming planning (Lamichhane & Wagley, 2008). Participants observe minimal critical pedagogy in virtual learning, and only some

foreign-affiliated colleges adopt it due to their resources. Personal introspection reveals subjectivity in critical pedagogy, with varying opinions and potential misinterpretations since constructive feedback skills are lacking. Often, feedback backfires. During COVID-19, institutions embraced virtual learning, continuing post-pandemic as institutions reduced costs. This posed problems for MBA students, as virtual learning doesn't enhance leadership skills essential for careers. Addressing the second research objective, MBA graduates note grades aren't crucial in careers beyond entry requirements. The corporate sector demands strong communication and hard skills, unmet by virtual learning.

CONCLUSION

The study illuminates the multifaceted implications of virtual interaction on management education, specifically focusing on MBA students. As revealed, the shift towards virtual learning environments—accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—has not sufficiently supported the development of essential practical skills for MBA students. Despite the logistical advantages of virtual interaction, such as overcoming geographical barriers, it falls short in cultivating the hands-on experiences vital for future business leaders. The findings underscore the necessity for a balanced approach, advocating for a hybrid model that combines online and in-person elements to better prepare students for the demands of the corporate world. This research provides valuable insights for educators and policymakers, highlighting the need to address the gap between academic performance and real-world competency in business curricula. A strategic reevaluation of teaching methods is crucial to ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of MBA programs in nurturing competent graduates ready to navigate and excel in their professional careers.

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