Self-directed learning on a full-time MBA – A cautionary tale

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Abstract
This article provides a cautionary tale of the complexities of implementing peer learning groups (PLG’s) and blended learning approaches for promoting self-directed learning (SDL) in the context of competing objectives for staff and students on a full-time MBA module in the field of HRM. We suggest that existing literature on PLG’s and SDL does not, so far, explore in detail messy contexts where organisational pressures on teaching teams lead to multiple, conflicting objectives that do not allow for a rational delivery of the anticipated pedagogic strategy. Recognising further the relatively limited amount of studies within a HRM teaching context, we seek to contribute to the SDL literature by outlining the problems that can occur when there are hidden objectives behind the use of SDL. We further suggest that the full-time MBA context may be particularly opposed to the use of SDL due to specific student expectations of ‘appropriate’ modes of delivery.

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1. Introduction

Within UK business schools, MBA programmes tend to play a significant role in terms of income generation and reputation management. Competitive advantage over MBA offerings by other business schools is a continuous challenge that tends to be heavily influenced by the content and teaching excellence a specific business school can offer. The competition for potential future students is fierce and the demands on staff teaching on MBA programmes are complex (Yeadon & Worsdale, 2012). MBA cohorts can and will demand an excellent learning and networking experience that drives their career forward in exchange for the high fees they pay. This puts a constant pressure onto staff to develop module learning and teaching strategies that are as engaging as possible and with clearly demonstrated and perceived learning outcomes. These demands further need to be seen in context of a paradigm shift in teaching away from a tutor-led approach towards one that provides greater opportunities for students to engage, feel empowered and confident about their own learning (Brady, 2013; Smith, 2000).

Thus, MBA programmes in common with other Business programmes are encouraged by a widening body of research to adopt non-traditional pedagogic strategies (Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010) such as Problem Based Learning (PBL) to facilitate Self-Directed Learning (SDL) skills. These skills are seen as essential for lifelong learning and success in the business world. Hay, Peltier, and Drago (2004) further report on the increasing importance for MBA programmes to utilise blended and online learning facilities that accommodate the students’ demands for flexibility and quality of provision.

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This generally positive outlook on SDL has been challenged by some studies showing that evidence is often too inconclusive to support the uncritical application of such approaches (e.g., Kremer & McGuinness, 1998; Yeaton & Worsdale, 2012). Arbaugh, Desai, Rau, and Sridhar (2010) add that some areas of management studies, such as the field of HRM, remain widely under-researched in this domain. Chew (2009) further warns that MBA students may be particularly inexperienced and unfamiliar with a SDL approach to teaching, yet does not offer evidence to support this warning.

This article contributes to our understanding of the complexity and potential problems of introducing SDL in a full-time MBA context through a cautionary tale and evaluation of one module leader’s attempt to introduce a peer learning approach to facilitate the development of SDL skills and digital literacy skills of full-time MBA students studying HRM. The module design was informed by a wide literature review on the subject of SDL and peer learning in face-to-face situations and in virtual learning environments as well as an informal inquiry into equivalent learning groups within other UK-based MBA programmes. Yet, despite this research informed design, there were also other, divergent objectives in place that led to a disappointing experience of students and staff with this approach. Such tensions have not been adequately recognised in the literature and the analysis of the cautionary tale in this article contributes to our understanding of SDL in the context of MBA students and in light of diverging objectives for the design of SDL.

The rest of this article is divided into four sections. First of all, it will provide a brief review of the literature on self-directed learning and peer learning offline and online. A second section will then focus on methods and outline the specific features of the SDL strategy adopted in this case as well as the methods employed in evaluating the success of this strategy. A third section discusses the main findings on student perceptions and interactions on the SDL activities and the final two sections contain the discussion of these findings and conclusions from this cautionary tale.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self-directed learning

Defining Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is problematic as the spectrum of meanings varies from person to person and institution to institution and from a variety of theoretical perspectives (Reagan, 2005). We draw here on Knowles’ (1975) classic definition that describes SDL as

’a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes’ (p. 18).

Although not without critics (e.g., Hammond & Collins, 1991) the acknowledgement of interaction sets SDL clearly within the constructionist paradigm which suggests that only when students are engaged actively in their own learning will deep learning occur (Boud, 1988). The skills they develop along the way are highly prized by employers and could go some way to explaining their growing popularity in Business Schools. As the SDL approach under review in this article uses peer learning groups as a tool to enhance self-directed learning online and offline, we will briefly review key findings from the peer learning and virtual learning environment literatures.

2.2. Peer learning groups as a tool for self-directed learning

There has been a fair amount of research on group-based learning (e.g., Beaty, 2003; Belbin, 1993; Biggs, 2003; Gersick, 1990; Kolb, 1984; Overton, 2003; Revans, 1982; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Yeaton & Worsdale, 2012) stressing the benefits of group work in general. Boud and Lee (2005) suggest that the absence of the tutor reduces the barriers of power and learning is enabled through greater engagement and open communication. Biggs (2003) adds that students will learn from peers within group work more easily than from the tutor as they have to use their own words and explanations to make sense of module material or a specific task. Keppell, Au, Ma, and Chan (2006) and Smith (2000) argue that such collaborative learning promotes lifelong learning and enhances capabilities of teamwork, interpersonal skills and independent, self-empowered learning of students (Kremer & McGuinness, 1998). Within an increasingly cost-oriented higher education context, peer learning also allows for innovative and cost-effective teaching methods (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007; Kremer & McGuinness, 1998; Topping, 2005).

Yet, it is important to recognise that research has provided mixed evidence with regards to peer learning’s promise to create superior learning experiences. Studies such as Crawford (2005), King (2002), Kremer and McGuinness (1998), Ravenscroft, Buckless, McCombs, and Zuckerman (1995) and Yamarik (2007) have all explored specific cases of peer learning and whilst they have found positive impact on student participation, performance, attention levels and cognitive processes, it is important to recognise the contextually bound nature of these studies. In addition, Bacon’s (2005) research revealed a negative impact of a group project on content learning. The generalisability of peer learning’s positive impact across all contexts hence remains questionable and worth further investigation.

It is also important to note other cautionary voices in relation to peer learning. DeVita (2001), Johnson et al. (2007), Topping (2005) and Yeaton & Worsdale (2012) stress the dangers of using peer learning in group work without care, proper design and purely as a means to cost reduction and hence advocate the need for structure and/or facilitation of peer learning activities and its embedding in the wider course design and/or assessment. Sweeney, Weaven, and Herington (2008)
add that group learning effectiveness is conditional upon the instructor’s preparation, coaching and debriefing of students regarding the expected benefits associated with participation in group projects.

In response to Sweeney et al. (2008), we argue it is further important to investigate student perceptions of different learning modes and to match carefully expectations of students and teachers. This should include recognising the importance of different student cohort contexts and cohort identities (Pownall, 2012). An exploration of student perceptions and the specific needs of a full-time MBA cohort are at the heart of the empirical part of this article. Before we turn to this evaluation, let us look at the relative importance of Virtual Learning Environments as a space for SDL.

2.3. Virtual learning environments as a space for self-directed learning

Information technologies and specifically Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) as a space for SDL have received increasing attention within the higher education sector over the last decade and have been identified to “solve many of the problems associated with societal pressures and concurrent changes in the HE sector (costs, quality of materials, focus on customer needs, response to competitive pressures)” (Franklin & Peat, 2001, p. 2). Whilst VLEs have been praised for their importance and usefulness within the wider teaching context and in relation to SDL (e.g. Bates, 2001; Marsh, Pountney, & Prigg, 2008; Meredith & Newton, 2003; Stoltz-Loike, Morell, & Loike, 2005), there is also recognition that such positive results require clear structure and facilitation (Franklin & Peat, 2001; Garrison, 2006; Keppell et al., 2006; Kickul & Kickul, 2004). Yet, studies have also stressed the significant variation in actual usage, endorsement and embedding of VLE tools within curriculum design across programmes and institutions (e.g. Fry & Love, 2007; Morris & Rippin, 2003; Moule, Ward, & Lockyer, 2010).

Arbaugh et al. (2010) identify several key areas for further research and argue that a clearer consideration of differences in learning styles is important as is the illumination of what we lose with online learning, i.e. why face-to-face may be more preferable. Ladyshewsky and Taplin’s (2013) research into preferred modes of study has since shed some light on varying student preferences and choices for online or face-to-face learning modes. We contribute to this effort by turning to tell our cautionary tale and analyse the complexities of using SDL in a full-time MBA context. As the SDL approach under investigation adopted a blended learning approach, our investigation will speak to both Chew’s (2009) concerns regarding the application of SDL in a MBA context as well as Arbaugh et al.’s (2010) research agenda to enhance our understanding of student preferences for SDL online and offline.

3. Methods of designing and evaluating SDL on a MBA HRM module

3.1. The SDL design

The particular SDL approach under review in this article was designed and implemented by the MBA HRM module leader of the business school at a university in the South East of England in response to student feedback requesting more one-to-one tutorial time. The adoption of Peer Learning Group activities as the key focus of this SDL approach reflects this attempt to create more student contact time within teaching hours and without sacrificing quality of module delivery. A secondary purpose of this design was also to ‘trial’ SDL as an alternative pedagogical approach on this full-time MBA programme.

The new structure included weekly group tasks (called ‘PLG triggers’ – to ‘trigger’ SDL behaviours) that were designed to be completed partly through group face-to-face contact and partly through group interaction within the VLE, with the main aims of preparing the students for the coming week’s lecture and developing knowledge and understanding for the final module assignment (a management report). A typical PLG Trigger would include a small case study and some prompt questions for discussion and investigation. The topic under investigation would be explored more fully in the following week’s lecture. Each PLG was given a ‘private’ Discussion Board to enable the continuation of discussions outside the class time to accommodate problems of meeting face to face. The groups were asked to upload their answers to these highly structured weekly tasks onto the ‘public’ discussion board where they could be accessed by other groups and the teaching team. This should ideally enhance peer learning as well as enable the teaching team to look at the answers in advance for the next lecture and to react to the outcome and target their lectures more efficiently to meet students’ learning needs.

The purpose of this SDL approach was hence manifold. It intended to:

- Create space for students to engage in SDL and for tutors to provide appointment time for one-to-one tutorials with individual students.
- Promote SDL by triggering discussion and investigation of core HR concepts and HR policy issues that would be explored in the following week’s session.
- Strengthen key communication and team working skills face-to-face as well as online and encourage increased student engagement with learning outcomes.
- Offer students empowering opportunities as their reflections on the module’s VLE were included in tutors’ teaching and contribute towards student learning for the final assignment, an individual case study report.

The design of this SDL approach was further informed by the wider SDL and PLG literature and therefore reflects a variety of assumptions held by the teaching team as summarised in Table 1.
3.2. Methods for evaluation

The above outlined SDL design was evaluated upon completion of the first run of the redesigned MBA HRM module. This evaluation intended to review the relative success of this new approach and subsequently inform the MBA programme team’s decision as to whether an SDL focussed approach should be adopted across the programme. The aim of this evaluation was to gain insight into student perceptions on the nature and success of the group activities on this specific MBA module as well as into the existence and nature of peer learning within the boundaries of these activities. With a view to avoiding possible bias, the module team asked a junior colleague to conduct this investigation independently and as part of her postgraduate teaching qualification. Two methods were employed for data gathering: a questionnaire and observation of VLE (WebCT) usage and participation. The Gestalt of these methods was informed by both the junior colleague’s expertise in the use of mixed methods and the teaching team’s interest in understanding students’ views of and participation in the PLG activities online and offline.

The questionnaire was designed by the junior colleague in collaboration with the teaching team and with the aim to measure student perceptions of and satisfaction with the SDL design. The questionnaire included 19 closed questions (see Table 2 for detail) that captured demographic information as well as views on the weekly activities (in Peer Learning Groups – PLGs), engagement with the VLE and overall satisfaction with the module and learning outcomes from the module. Scales of one to four – strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree – were used for the majority of the 19 questions. The questionnaire was handed out to the 30 students present in class towards the end of the module and all students returned the questionnaire fully completed. From the three demographic questions included in the questionnaire, we have the following cohort specific information:

- The sample had a gender split of 64% male and 36% female.
- 90% of the students had prior experience with group work.
- Only 13% had less than 3 years work experience, 33% had 3–5 years work experience, 17% 5–8 years work experience and 37% more than 8 years work experience.

As there are 42 students in total on this module, the answers and findings of this questionnaire can be treated as generalisable across the total student population on this module and therefore as representative for the general perceptions/views of this population. The data set resulting from this questionnaire was analysed via the use of simple correlations and frequency tables in SPSS.

The observation of WebCT usage and participation by all eight peer learning groups (PLGs) on this MBA module sought to provide further insight into the nature, quality and frequency of communication and interaction occurring online. Once all peer learning group tasks had been completed, the following information was extracted from the WebCT discussion site:

- Total number of message listings for each of the eight PLGs.
- Progression of communication over the weeks and for each task.
- Nature/type of messages posted on WebCT.
- Participation trends of individual members within the PLGs.
- Delivery of answers to each task for each PLG.

The content analyses of discussion site posts on WebCT were guided by Newman’s (1995) typology of critical thinking stages and skills with a view to understanding the nature and quality of PLG specific interaction online and subsequently understand the extent to which SDL skills were being nurtured.

Although these two methods have provided appropriate data it is clearly limited in terms of depth and insights into the actual processes and interaction within each peer learning group, particularly face-to-face. It has also provided a rather limited insight into the specific characteristics of this particular cohort. Ideally, this initial data set generated through this investigation ought to be supplemented through future research with qualitative focus group interviews and observation of

Table 1
Module team’s assumptions about their SDL design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Assumption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Peer learning leads to greater empowerment and independent learners if designed carefully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>If the peer learning activities are highly structured in terms of task, group size, group membership, time and place, they will be successful and lead to higher levels of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Independent peer learning groups will free the tutors’ time to interact with individual students whilst not compromising any learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Embedding peer learning activities within the wider module structure will help the students in preparing for the final assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Running peer learning groups off-line and online will enhance not only peer interaction but also offer asynchronous conversations between students and tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>A cohort of full-time MBA students with prior working and education experience will be able to work independently as a group without the need for constant tutor facilitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>A full-time MBA cohort will value the empowerment that comes with being able to contribute to the content and direction of the weekly lectures through their interaction online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
face-to-face interaction within the groups. This would enable detailed analyses of the group interactions and dynamics that could enhance our understanding of the process of peer learning in groups in greater detail.

4. Findings

4.1. The questionnaire results

Student views on the usefulness of peer learning groups (PLGs) were largely and rather consistently split in half across most of the questions included in this questionnaire with a trend towards a generally positive picture. Table 2 summarises the full set of results:

From Table 2 and focussing particularly on the results for Questions 4, 6, 7, 13 and 14 — we can see that the majority of students agree PLG activities on this module to have generally aided their learning but are not necessarily seen to be more effective in preparing students for their final assignment or to add to greater learning outcomes than modules without PLGs. Further analyses of correlations across all 19 questions in this questionnaire revealed that there were strong, positive correlations between these general learning outcomes questions and the time students have spent face-to-face discussing the tasks. This indicates that longer group face-to-face contact seems to be related to a more positive perception of the learning outcomes gained from PLG activities.

A few of the 19 questions were further dedicated to finding out to what extent students were actually engaging within their groups face-to-face and on WebCT and what the general perceptions were on the WebCT element in their tasks. Based on the questionnaire results, the majority of students:

- tended to spend little time on face-to-face contact within their groups and quickly went on to tackle the tasks individually.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q. 4: Working in my PLG has helped me to engage with and understand the module content better than on modules that do not use peer learning groups.</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 5: When working in my PLG I find myself spending a considerable amount of time, i.e. more than 2 h with my group members talking about the weekly PLG tasks.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 6: I have learned a lot about other people’s ideas and viewpoints through the work in my PLG.</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 7: The PLG activities have contributed to my learning on this module.</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 8a: In your PLG, is an appointed leader in place?</td>
<td>Yes: 8%</td>
<td>No: 92%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 8b: In your PLG, is an informal leader in place?</td>
<td>Yes: 27%</td>
<td>No: 73%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 8c: In your PLG, are explicitly assigned roles and responsibilities in place?</td>
<td>Yes: 44%</td>
<td>No: 56%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 8d: In your PLG, are implicitly assigned roles and responsibilities in place?</td>
<td>Yes: 39%</td>
<td>No: 61%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 9: In our PLG, we tend to have different views on how to achieve/perform the weekly tasks.</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 10: In our PLG, we have had to change our strategy for performing a task at least once.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 11: In our PLG, we tend to get most of the work done shortly before the deadline.</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 12: We tend to spend little time as a group face-to-face and split up quickly to get on with our individual work around the task.</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 13: Working in my PLG has helped me to prepare for each week's learning session.</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 14: Working in my PLG is helping me to prepare for the final assignment on this module.</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 15: WebCT has enabled our PLG to communicate better and quicker outside the classroom.</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 16: Our PLG prefers to meet up in person or via email to discuss the task rather than use WebCT.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 17: How often do you use WebCT for your PLG activities each week?</td>
<td>0: 7%</td>
<td>1: 76%</td>
<td>3–5: 10%</td>
<td>+5: 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 18: I find that the other groups’ contributions on WebCT add to my learning.</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 19: On balance, I believe that the PLG HAVE or HAVE NOT supported my learning on this module.</td>
<td>Yes: 57%</td>
<td>No: 43%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
agreed that WebCT is a good tool for communication.
- tended to use WebCT for communication infrequently, i.e. once or twice a week.
- agreed that other group’s contributions uploaded on WebCT had aided their learning.

These key findings seem to suggest that WebCT was viewed as a positive tool but does not appear to be used as much as one would expect given the positive attitude towards it.

4.2. Participation on WebCT

The observations of usage and participation on WebCT revealed three module wide trends. Firstly, communication on WebCT tended to become less frequent within most groups as the module progressed. All PLGs had identified clear group rules at the beginning of the module but apart from one PLG, none of the groups seemed to adhere to these rules. The WebCT communication within the PLGs tended to be dominated by individual students who seemed to adopt informal leadership roles over the course of the module.

Secondly, the content analyses of posts revealed that most messages posted on WebCT were answers to the task questions by individual students. A few general comments or coordination/planning messages were posted but on no occasion did an actual dialogue develop between the students within a PLG. It therefore does not seem that students used WebCT effectively and actively as a means of communication and interaction in the group. Compared to Newman’s (1995) summary of critical thinking stages and skills, the interaction observed here was limited to problem identification, definition and clarification and hence left out the higher levels of inference or judgement building in dialogue.

Finally, there was no clear relationship visible between frequency of WebCT communication and the successful achievement of the weekly tasks. For example, one PLG posted only 1 message compared to another PLG that posted 21 messages, yet both groups managed to upload answers to the PLG tasks only three times. This last finding shows an apparent preference for offline interaction despite generally positive attitudes towards WebCT expressed in the questionnaire. It further demonstrates how this particular group of MBA students actively chose to work offline when given the choice.

5. Reflections on the data

To recap, the questionnaire and WebCT content analyses showed that students seem to have gained clear learning benefits from this specific type of group work, both face-to-face as well as via WebCT. Yet, the analyses also revealed that the actual participation of students face-to-face in their groups and on WebCT was rather infrequent and lacked higher level engagement and dialogue online (Newman, 1995). Despite expressing generally positive views on PLGs, students did not perceive this pedagogical approach to be superior to other — more traditional — forms of teaching and learning. The data hence shows that literature wide views, assuming PLGs encourage higher learning outcomes than traditional group tasks (based on Biggs, 2003; Boud & Lee, 2005; Keppell et al., 2006; Kremer & McGuinness, 1998) and that VLEs offer alternative, beneficial ways for synchronous conversation (based on Franklin & Peat, 2001; Morris & Rippin, 2003), were not shared by this MBA cohort.

The PLG model adopted on this full-time MBA HRM module hence achieved only some of its literature informed aims outlined in Section 3.1 of this article and was subsequently not adopted across the whole MBA programme. These rather mixed findings and failure to promote a programme-wide SDL approach led the teaching team to engage in a process of further reflection on their own assumptions, objectives and possible limitations of the PLG design. As a result, the teaching team realised that what the design had not addressed were the inherently divergent objectives of staff and students involved in this and the particular issues around SDL in an MBA context highlighted by Chew (2009).

The main objective communicated to students was that it would provide an improved student experience and learning environment. However, contrary to this student-focussed objective, the major driver for the module leader to reconfigure resources and redesign the module had been the student demand for 1:1 tutorials and the institutional pressure to meet the expectations and needs of these high paying customers. The module leader’s review of relevant literature and the design of the SDL approach were hence framed by the assumption that it will ‘solve the problem’ and subsequently more attention was paid to positive literature views on SDL rather than critical voices. In the attempt to provide students with more time to discuss individual problems and questions, the design included a lot of choice and flexibility for students to engage or not engage in groups face-to-face or online.

As we know through the questionnaire data, such choice and flexibility had a negative effect and led to relatively low engagement with group work. As the correlation analyses of the questionnaire data further showed a positive correlation between face-to-face contact in PLGs and perceptions on positive outcomes from PLGs, it seems that — for this full-time MBA cohort — there is a need to enforce face-to-face contact within PLGs to nurture SDL skills. This was surprising as the initial assumption had been that an MBA cohort would be able to work independently in a group and indeed value the empowerment. The opposite seems to be true and empirically supports Chew’s (2009) critical view on MBA students’ ability to cope with self-directed learning and problem-based learning tasks.

Another unexpected outcome was the students’ active choice not to frequently use the alternative communication channel in the VLE. This could support De George-Walker and Keeffe’s (2010) finding that students based on campus prefer face-to-face engagement over online interaction. On the other hand and in reflection on Chew’s (2009) view of MBA students low
readiness for SDL, such relative disengagement may also be seen as a form of resistance to this alternative approach to teaching and learning. In order to change students’ expectations and assumptions on what type of teaching is good value for money, SDL may need to be embedded within the entire curriculum rather than ‘trialled’ on a single module.

What can we learn from this to create more successful SDL experiences within a full-time MBA context? In light of the tutors’ experience and the above findings, we suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the interaction between the actual process involved in the planning and doing stages of the SDL activities on this MBA module and particularly with a view to an honest assessment of staff and student expectations and objectives. The analysis of the particular SDL tale told in this article shows that the main reasons for the PLG activities’ failure to achieve higher learning outcomes, successful blended learning and better preparation for the assignment, can be identified as:

- Misinterpretation of cohort skills and mismatch of student/tutor expectations of SDL.
- Lack of upfront embedding of model into wider programme design.
- Incomplete design/planning of the PLG activities.
- Insufficient/inappropriate facilitation and structuring of the activities (especially the ‘how to’ discuss).
- Divergent objectives for the adoption of an SDL approach.

Several suggestions for both the planning and doing stages of PLG activities on this specific MBA module have been identified in response to this problematic SDL experience. Quite a few of these suggestions, we argue, are likely to be transferable beyond this example within a full-time MBA context and support as well as expand on existing recommendations in the literature. The first suggestion supports the recommendation found in the literature on deep embedding within the wider programme structure (e.g. Topping, 2005; Yeadon & Worsdale, 2012). More specifically, we suggest that such an embedding needs to also imply programme wide responsibility. Programmes should conduct and share with module leaders a cohort analysis that captures previous experience of students with group work that helps with the formulation of contextually informed selection criteria for the group memberships. Such information was not available to the module leader in this cautionary tale and the design of the SDL approach seems to have suffered as a consequence.

Secondly, we support Arbaugh et al. (2010) and suggest that teaching teams need to gain a clear understanding of student learning styles within a specific cohort and then acknowledge these in the PLG design. Such an incorporation of cohort specific motivation factors is also linked to the specific link between PLGs and assessment on the module as well as use or non-use of blended learning methods. Hence, it is important to understand what channels of communication your cohort uses and prefers with a view to the wider programme they are in and hence whether and to what extent a blended learning approach would be effective. Arbaugh et al. (2010) stress that, at present, this link between cohort analysis, learning preferences and PLG design has not been adequately explored in empirical research.

When it comes to the ‘doing’ stage of PLG activities, we suggest it is important to be consistent in terms of briefings on the overall PLG model and individual activities. This includes strict alignment of design and communication of activities with a view to the learning preferences and assessment requirements mentioned above. The teaching team further needs to analyse the adequacy of the level of structure and facilitation needed by a specific student body and within the context of a specific module. Any assumptions made regarding the context and student body need to be based on an initial cohort analysis and their cohort identity (Pownall, 2012) rather than on general assumptions on a UG/PG difference driven by Blooms Taxonomy levels. This degree of importance of an in-depth understanding of the cohort has so far not been stressed in the literature. With regards to the experiences on this MBA module, we suggest that facilitation of tutors is needed throughout the activities with specific focus on reinforcing the educational rationale behind the PLG model and students’ understanding of the link between the activities, their learning outcomes and the assessment. This entails understanding learning preferences and incorporating/acknowledging student contributions as empowered learners in a way that is suitable for a specific cohort. Student expectations hence need to be actively managed throughout to ensure perceived higher learning levels through PLG activities. Finally, these suggestions also entail careful consideration of underlying objectives for the use of SDL. Using this approach as a key means to making time for 1:1 interaction is — as we saw through our cautionary tale — a flawed model that creates tensions between student and staff expectations regarding time, teaching styles and learning preferences and directs too much attention away from the all important, careful set-up, planning and implementation of SDL activities.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the cautionary tale in this article has contributed to our understanding of the complexities of introducing SDL and peer learning within a full-time MBA teaching context. It has particularly helped to address the difficult reality of working with divergent objectives due to competing pressures of both institutional and students’ expectations of staff time and pedagogical approach.

The two most striking findings from the data analyses were that a) these MBA students did not think that peer learning activities led to higher learning outcomes than traditional forms of teaching and group work; b) that these MBA students did not seem to want an additional online form of communication. These two findings run counter the generally positive view found in the literature on peer learning online and off-line but do reflect more critical views of the readiness of MBA students for SDL (Chew, 2009). The further review of the design process and limitations of the planning and doing stages of the peer
learning groups on this MBA module revealed two important lessons. Firstly, that it is crucial to conduct a thorough cohort analysis before designing or implementing SDL and/or peer learning groups. Secondly and following the cohort analysis, it is vital to engage in active expectation and contribution management through appropriate tutor facilitation. This is crucial as a mismatch of perceptions and expectations on what students and tutors think students want, can do and are doing may impede learning outcomes.

We would also like to stress that this data set and our analyses reflect the particular needs of this MBA cohort and that no generalisation should be drawn. Indeed our findings may be particularly unique to the characteristics of this cohort and subsequently not fully applicable to other cohorts. This should encourage us to challenge deep set assumptions about different cohort contexts at UG and PG level. The existing literature on self-directed and peer learning online and offline has so far neglected to recognise cohort contexts to the extent this article highlights is necessary and future research is needed to broaden our understanding of different contexts and their impact on peer learning design. Investigations into the paradox between student attitudes towards VLEs and actual usage are further areas for future research that again aids clarity on student and staff expectations on specific teaching tools and methods. Finally, as cohort specific information was relatively missing from this study (apart from information on gender, work and prior group experience) yet shown to be of high importance, future research could also explore existing diversity within MBA programmes as well as other programmes that enhances our understanding of the extent to which student attitudes towards PLGs and VLEs are informed by factors such as culture, gender, age and work experience.

References