

# Designing an Action Learning Course for an MBA Program: A Qualitative Evaluation

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## Abstract

This research project aims to evaluate the design of an Action Learning (AL) introductory business course to be integrated into the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program of a Bangkok-based international business school. An 8-week course was designed applying the AL approach and an interpretive qualitative approach used to evaluate it. In addition to observations by the author, students in the class shared their experiences at various points in time (while taking this course, at the end of it, and one year after they completed their coursework). Moreover, learning reflections were assigned every two weeks, and a research focus group comprising some of the students in this class was formed for the purpose of assessing the course. Consistent with previous studies, the findings suggest that the AL approach has the potential to enhance a wide variety of skills. One of the most important skills they had to master was teamwork. While students acknowledged that it took time to learn, accept, and correctly implement the AL approach, the overall work efficiency of the teams improved dramatically past this point. The value of this particular course design evaluation lies in its contribution to practice and the research design.

**Keywords:** MBA, Action Learning, Course Design, Evaluation Research, Teamwork

## 1. Introduction

For most people, the feeling that the world forces us to change faster than ever is not just, as Colvile (2016) points out, an abstract notion. For them, changes are real as companies and their employees are under enormous pressure to maintain their competitiveness (Colvile, 2016). As early as 2000, Albert (2000) warned that to remain competitive companies needed more employees with higher education degrees, Masters of Business Administration (MBA) in particular. MBA graduates entering the job market have a key role to play in assisting firms to secure a competitive advantage in a region, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), that is in the process of transforming itself into a single market and production base (Symonds, Schwartz, and Ferguson, 2011). As Kuratko (2003) points out, when properly designed and implemented, MBA programs can be expected to build the essential skills and knowledge required by organizations to be innovative and keep up with a fast-changing environment. According to Binks, Starkey, and Mahon (2006), this can only be done if, in addition to inculcating basic business knowledge and developing Interpersonal Skills (IPS), current MBA programs also build strong entrepreneurial skills. This should take place at an early stage of the MBA program (Bedwell, Fiore, and Salas, 2014).

Not all MBA programs, however, are similarly situated. Nagi (2016) determined that the integration of ASEAN ten member states into an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) presented tremendous challenges to Thailand's higher education system as many MBA programs fail to meet the standards of neighbour countries, most notably Singapore. There is clearly an urge to improve these programs. As Hamel (2008, 2009) observed, many full-time MBA lecturers tend to be highly specialized in their respective management discipline and for

this reason generally favor a more ‘theoretical’ approach to management practice. The result is that many current MBA students feel frustrated and discouraged by the course content, which, in their view, often fails to develop the leadership skills needed in their future careers. In many ways, this is not a new issue. As early as 1995, Robotham argued that a teaching style tailored to learners’ needs could significantly enhance self-directed learning – recognized as an essential skill for any learner. It is well established that the national culture of participants has an impact on their preferred learning styles (Huijser, 2006; Vita, 2001; Wintterlin, 2008). Whilst some cultures prefer to start with theory, others favor a more practical approach as their preferred learning style. Since today, many MBA schools include a sizeable number of international students with diverse cultural backgrounds, this is an important factor to take into account when designing courses (Goerlich, 2014, 2018). Research on the correlation between learning styles and learning success, however, is limited. There is therefore an increasing need to better understand the dynamics of learning and identify appropriate learning styles (Romanelli, Bird, and Ryan, 2009). One learning style that has been gaining currency lately is the Action Learning approach (AL). It is believed to have the capacity to open up new horizons and challenge traditional management education (M J Marquardt, 2011; M J Marquardt et al., 2009; Yorks, 1999). Still, while promising novel ways and an innovative learning model, it does not herald a seismic change.

This study focuses on the AL approach. Specifically, in light of an experimental (pilot) program tested in the classroom and evaluated by its participants, it seeks to determine what an AL course should look like and what particular issues are associated with it. The following research questions (RQ) and research objectives (RO) guide this study:

RQ1: What was the students’ experience with the pilot AL course?

RO1: To evaluate students’ experience with the pilot AL course (a) during the course, (b) directly after the course completion, and (c) one year later.

RQ2: What was the learning impact of this course design on skills development and knowledge mastery?

RO2. To evaluate the learning impact of this course design on (a) skills development and (b) knowledge mastery.

RQ3: What are the potential issues associated with an AL course design?

RO3. To evaluate potential issues regarding (a) the AL method and (b) learners.

## 2. Literature Review and Research Questions

As reflected by the large body of literature that has emerged over time, the conceptualization of learning and how learning takes place has traditionally been of high interest to academics (Romanelli et al., 2009; Nithya et al., 2019). With the dissemination of various theories of learning and learning styles, there has been a natural evolution of the approaches to learning, some relevant to this research (Rohrer & Pashler, 2012; Donggun & Martha, 2017), others of lesser pertinence. To provide background to this research study, help to put Action Learning into perspective and understand how teaching has evolved, it is therefore necessary first to briefly discuss the concept of traditional learning.

### - *Traditional Learning*

Broadly speaking, traditional ways of learning can be defined as “changes in behavior that result from experience or mechanistically as changes in the organism that result from experience” (De Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, & Moors, 2013, p. 1). As determined by Bonesso, Gerli, and Pizzi (2015), there is strong evidence that with the more traditional ways of teaching (i.e., the lecture format), important competencies cannot be developed compared to an experience-based learning format, in which the emphasis is on the learner’s own experiences (learning by doing). According to Khalaf (2018) “traditional learning produces active and non-

active learners, a result of its conceptualization of the learning process. Traditional behavioral classes do not favor active engagement of learners in the learning process, but rather focus on the behavioral impacts of immediate context and the teacher's role on learners" (p. 546). The result often is an insufficient learning outcome. As Khalaf (2018) further points out, "the current technological revolution, investigations, and changes in curricula require significant reform in learning methods" (p. 561).

### - *Learning Cycle Theory*

One highly influential theory, and one of great import to educators, especially those involved in designing courses, is Kolb's (1985) learning cycle theory. The following four elements are central to the theory:

- *Concrete Experience* – Someone experiences a situation for the first time
- *Reflective Observation of the New Experience* – What has someone experienced based on his/her own observations? What was noticeable, important or simply worth remembering?
- *Abstract Conceptualization* – When learning manifests itself into new ideas, this can then be conceptualized into something new, for example a new theory.
- *Active Experimentation* – When someone eventually applies the new ideas that have been conceptualized to the real world context and see what happens (Kolb, 1985).

As can be easily gathered from the above, Kolb's (1985) learning style theory enables educators to critically evaluate the impact of the learning style introduced as part of the course design and ultimately create more effective learning methods (McLeod, 2017). In their review of the various learning styles derived from Kolb's learning cycle theory, Dantasa and Cunhab (2020) argue that it would be unwise to choose a single learning style in a course/program as various students have various need of learning preferences. This suggests that, in addition to targeting particular learning styles, educators should also choose appropriate learning methods that combine those various learning styles.

### - *Action Learning*

Could Action Learning (AL) be the appropriate learning method? Widely discussed in the relevant body of literature, the AL approach has been recognized as one of the more effective means of learning (Altrichter et al., 2002; Zuber-Skerritt, 2002; Kramer, 2008; Scott, 2017). Originally developed by Revans (1982), AL can be described as "a means of development, intellectual, emotional, or physical that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change to improve their observable behavior henceforth in the problem field" (Revans, 1982, p. 626-627). One core question is how AL differ from the learning styles discussed in the learning cycle theory. According to Revans (2011), AL is not a learning style or an approach to learning designed to solve simple or easy to solve puzzles but instead primarily a way to help to solve complex issues and accomplish challenging tasks. Pedler (1991) describes AL as "an approach to the development of people in organizations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning" (pp. xxii–xxiii).

AL is based on the following premise: "there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning" (Pedler, 1991, p. xxii-xxiii). As a methodology, AL involves three main components: people, problems and colleagues. People take responsibility for taking actions on a particular issue and problems refer to the tasks that people set for themselves. As to colleagues, it typically takes a set of approximately six of them, who are expected to "support and challenge each other to make progress on problems" (Pedler, 1991, p. xxii-xxiii). Individuals thus have to somehow work together in a group or team setting with the goal to resolve and take action on "real problems in real time, and learning through questioning and reflection while doing so" (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004, p. 2). In this study,

AL will therefore be conceived as a learning process that engages learners in a ‘set’ or ‘group’ of people in order to draw on their own experiences, reflect on their own learning by asking questions around complex and difficult-to-solve challenges, and take action to implement and test possible solutions.

#### **- Action Learning as Applied to MBA Programs**

While there has been ample research on how AL can be applied to MBA programs (Pell, no date), none of it has specifically come out in outright support or rejection of AL, providing instead a more critically balanced approach. As early as 1987, Caie identified quite positive results from AL as applied to MBA programs and argued that AL demonstrated a clear contribution to theory and practice by exhibiting “immediate relevance to their needs [students] and its focus on application and implementation, as well as theory” (p. 1). Similar positive results were reported in a more recent study by Johnson and Spicer (2006) investigating MBA courses based on AL. According to them, managers who attended the program indicated that they could better reflect on the issues raised and bring to the table their own experiences, which helped them and other participants to develop a broader understanding and absorption of management practices. An even more recent study by Schaupp and Vitullo (2019) also shows the positive impact of AL on MBA student’s experiences. Focusing on a real consultancy project undergone as part of the MBA curriculum, it concludes that those who took part in the project will be able to use AL to facilitate the search for solutions in ‘real’ companies; a clear sign that the AL methodology applied for that project does promote deep understanding and learning. Belet (2019) reached a similar conclusion, arguing that “the mainstream management educational system based on the old MBA model has become obsolete and inadequate” (p. 10), mainly because it has failed to develop the necessary skills, particularly IPS. Belet’s study also points to the need for more MBA programs relying on AL to help to develop and prepare the “manager-leaders” of tomorrow, who will need to be equipped with much more adequate human management and leadership competences than the present graduates of most traditional business schools.

That said, the AL narrative has also generated skepticism among scholars, including when applied to MBA programs (Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale, 2012; Wikhamn, 2017). Critical views on MBA programs incorporating AL essentially focus on its relevance, or rather on the lack thereof. For example, Yeadon-Lee and Worsdale (2012) found that the AL benefits among the MBA students surveyed were rather mixed as some of the students reported experiencing ‘power play’ among them when conducting group work. The hierarchy that developed caused some students to be perceived as more powerful or influential than others. Those developments had a rather negative impact on some students learning abilities. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Yeadon-Lee and Worsdale (2012) did not discard the fact that AL can be conducive to a positive learning environment if “a climate in which [learning] set members feel both emotionally and psychologically secure” is established (p. 18). According to them, if this can be achieved, then AL will have a very positive impact on the learning process. In light of the literature reviewed, it is easy to see why on balance a course designed with AL at its core can be a valuable addition to an MBA program following a more traditional methodology.

### **3. Methodology and Conceptual Framework**

This study follows a qualitative methodology.

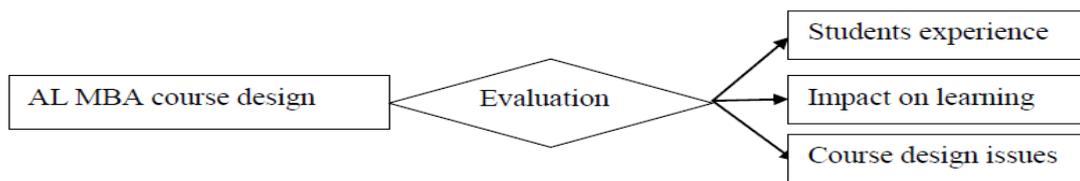
#### **- Experimental Course Design**

As we just saw, AL is a learning process that engages learners in a ‘set’ or ‘group’ of people in order to draw on their own experiences, reflect on their own learning by asking questions around complex and difficult-to-solve challenges, and take action to implement and test

possible solutions. As part of the process of incorporating AL into the course design, the following four issues need to be addressed first:

- (i) How should the course be designed? Given that each week, a new topic such as HR, marketing, or finance, etc, would be introduced to a group of new-to-the-program students, how could AL be used in an 8-week international MBA introduction class?
- (ii) How could skills be developed? Has AL the potential to effectively prepare students for the MBA program and at the same time build essential skills, including interpersonal skills, such as curiosity, analytical, teamwork etc, and technical skills?
- (iii) When would be the appropriate time to introduce AL to the course participants? According to Yeadon-Lee and Worsdale (2012), group work should be introduced at the start of a program when groups have not yet been formed.
- (iv) How should the course be evaluated? How could this class be researched?

Based on these key questions, the following framework was developed:



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**  
(compiled by the author for this research study)

A new experimental class had to be designed from scratch, applying the AL approach and its core principals. The next several paragraphs briefly outlined the process.

As a first step, learning outcomes fitting with the overall MBA learning outcomes were articulated. Since the course was designed as an introductory class to business, each learning outcome had to be connected to the topic introduced on a weekly basis (e.g. Week 3, Marketing, Week 4, HR, etc.). A series of questions was asked each week. For example, on Week 4, one of the queries was: What is the problem of the HR department and how is it affecting the company? Next, literature was reviewed and the AL approach considered the most relevant to that introductory class selected. At a later stage the course design was presented to all faculty members from whom feedback was gathered. The most functional approach to AL is the Marquardt approach introduced by Marquardt and Waddill (2004). This approach is an amalgam of the European and American AL types. It comprises the following six key elements (Marquardt, 2011): (i) a problem (a project, challenge, opportunity, issue or task); (ii) an action learning group or a team; (iii) a process that emphasizes insightful questioning and reflective listening; (iv) taking action on the problem; (v) a commitment to learning; and (vi) an action learning coach (Marquardt, 2004). As determined by Marquardt (2011), two rules must be followed: (i) statements can only be made in response to questions; and (ii) the action learning coach has the power to intervene whenever he/she sees an opportunity for learning.

A fictitious scenario involving a Thai-based insurance company currently facing a challenging situation was created for this class. When the founder and owner of the company passed away, he bequeathed the company to his sons and daughter, who do not have a business background. Soon, the once-successful company found itself in a difficult position due to the decisions they had made. Each class also included a made-up mini case study that introduced new, complex, and challenging issues around the topic of the week. Applying the AL approach, students, who were grouped in small teams representing a team of consultants hired by the company, were asked to identify the issues raised by the fictitious scenario and the weekly mini case and suggest possible solutions. Each team had to produce a PowerPoint presentation that

outlined the problems faced by the company and the appropriate solutions/remedies, relying on the relevant theoretical background (which they had to search by themselves as part of the application of the principles of learning by doing). The lecturer’s role was essentially to introduce the AL approach, answer any questions in case something might be misunderstood, and ensure that the guidelines were applied (e.g. making sure that each group had a learning coach, statements were made only after questions, etc.). Since the lecturer did not otherwise interfere with the class or group dynamics, his/her role was more that of a facilitator than a lecturer. Between each class, students had access to an online learning platform (Blackboard Learn) that included the 8-week syllabus, a description of each assessment and the case study, multiple choice questionnaires (one each week), four learning reflections (one every other week), the group work’s PowerPoint group work, and a final individual capstone project (consultancy progress report). The multiple-choice questionnaires covered the key theories/topics related to the previous class. Students could repeat the online questionnaires as many times as they wanted until they were satisfied with the results (each new attempt involved different random questions). The goal was to give students an opportunity to test their own understanding of the topics introduced with the case study. In addition, every two weeks, students had to write a learning reflection. 20% of the total grade covered online multiple-choices, 20% the learning reflections, 20% in class activities and 40% the individual capstone.

**- Evaluation Research**

Evaluation research is the main method used in this study. It can be defined as the systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcome of [a class/program...] compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards” (Weiss 1998) and is regarded as a means of contributing to the improvement of a course or a program (Weiss, 1998). It can thus also be described as a particular research method directly linked to applied research without any attempt to develop new theories but rather to focus on practical implications (Hall & Hall, 2004). Evaluation research can be subdivided into formative and summative evaluation. Formative evaluation seeks to understand the processes within the program/class so as to improve them in the future. Summative evaluation determines the outcome against a benchmark or assess the overall results of the program/class like overall satisfaction of students (Hall & Hall, 2004). Both types of evaluation were applied to this research. The purpose is to understand how something is happening “rather than [coming] in addition to outputs and outcomes” (Patton, 2002 p.159). It is an analysis of the processes (Patton, 1987). This research used Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick’s (2006) four levels of evaluation shown as a basis to evaluate students (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Four Levels of Evaluation

Level	Basic Questions	Assessment Method
Reaction	What were students’ initial reactions to the class and its design?	Observations, qualitative learning reflections, qualitative questionnaire and focus group
Learning	What did students learn in this class?	Observations, qualitative learning reflections, qualitative questionnaire and focus group
Behavior	Was there a change of behavior as a result of AL during and after the course was over?	Observations, qualitative learning reflections, qualitative questionnaire and focus group
Results	Overall, how do students consider this AL class in relation to their own learning and skills development and in terms of its appropriateness within the MBA program? Any other issues?	Observations, qualitative learning reflections, qualitative questionnaire and focus group

Source: Compiled by the author based on Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006)

### **- Data Collection**

To triangulate the results, different data collection methods are necessary. In this study, they included the following:

(i) *Observation*: According to White (2000), as an accurate record of what people do and say in real-life situations, observation is "the most obvious method of data collection" (p. 34). For one thing, in contrast to some other data-gathering technique, observations do not interfere with the research objects (Punch, 2005). For all these reasons, as the consequent reflection of the observed situations, observations are an essential aspect of this research projects. In this study, observations were mostly conducted in the classroom.

(ii) *Learning Reflection*: As an integral part of the evaluation process, students had to submit qualitative learning reflections every two weeks. Specifically, they were asked to reflect on their own learning, what they noticed, why this was important for them and, most importantly, had to describe in their own words what surprised or impressed them most. Learning reflections have been a valuable resource in this research as they provide a wealth of information about students' learning and experiences.

(iii) *Satisfaction Questionnaire*: At the end of the course, a standardised satisfaction questionnaire that included qualitative elements was distributed. It should be noted that it is used for all MBA courses to evaluate lecturers and not just for that class. Being used for all courses made it possible to compare students' comments in this class with other classes.

(iii) *Focus Group*: Exactly one year after the course was completed and almost at the end of the international MBA program, a focus group consisting of 9 randomly selected students who attended the introductory class was formed. Even though the class only had 31 students, the amount of information gathered was rich enough to make triangulation possible.

### **- Data Analysis**

Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2006) four-level evaluation approach was used in this study as the main analytical method. In addition, Miles and Huberman's (1994) method was applied to structure and organize the large amount of qualitative data. As a first step, data was collected. Next, details of the interviews, focus group, observations, and learning reflections were carefully scanned and reduced into meaningful paragraphs. Conclusions were then drawn (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and a 'template analysis' designed to thematically organize and analyse textual data put together (King, 2004).

## **4. Findings**

The following is an account of the observations and overall evaluation results by topic (research questions).

### **- RQ1: What was Students' Experience with the AL Course?**

To address this question, three perspectives are considered; (a) during the class; (b) directly after the course completion; and (c) one year later (focus group).

#### *a) During the Class*

Almost all students had initial reservations about the concept of AL and its strong emphasis on teamwork, even though working as a team was not new to most of them. They soon realized, though, that teamwork was not only an important component of the course mechanism, but also a major source of satisfaction. The fact that, unlike in other courses, students were asked to work as teams right from the beginning was an important factor. As one student pointed out, it helped them "see how [they] could benefit from each other." Another student's previous experience with group work was rather negative as she had to do all the work but this changed during this AL class. As she explained, she didn't believe "this time would be different. I was so wrong. For the first time I see results from working with others [team]."

*b) Directly After the Course Completion*

Observations supported the findings from the focus group. Many students felt extremely tense when they started to work in teams. Many groups (not teams yet at this juncture in the course) did not talk much at first and nobody had any idea about what AL was and how it worked. But they quickly adapted and teams started to develop as they adhered to AL principles. Observations also confirmed that students asked a lot of question during their team sessions. A central aspect of the AL approach is to ask questions before a statement can be made. This seems to have helped some students to communicate better with one another. In one instance, for example, a student complained about another student who never said much. However, having no choice in her AL session, that student ended up having to ask questions, which changed her perception in the eyes of other students and gave her the confidence to keep talking.

*(c) One Year Later*

At the focus group, it was repeatedly confirmed that communication during teamwork improved a lot as a result of the AL. As one student noted, because they all had to use questions, they were often asked to further elaborate on their queries, with questions such as: “What do you mean by [...] or can you give me an example what you are referring to?” In their opinions, this helped them a lot in their subsequent courses as they realized that asking questions to confirm a point, restate an argument, or contrast ideas was very helpful indeed in mastering new concepts. Having to use questions before a statement could be made also had long-term benefits as it changed their perception of the learning process. Whereas they would generally assume that they understood the problem(s) well, once they started to ask questions, they realized this was often not the case. As they noted, once they came up with more questions, they really started to better understand the material discussed. Most students never experienced nor expected that no lecture would be given on the weekly topics. That they had to work collectively to find out together what the issues and the relevant theories were and had to learn by applying new knowledge by connecting theory with practice surprised them at first but turned out to a learning method of choice. Another long-term benefit of their AL experience is the ability to build trust among team members and develop self-confidence as the team members’ trust and openness were conducive to expressing oneself. Students now realize how important this is when working as a team.

**- RQ2: What was the Learning Impact of this Course Design?**

The impact of AL on skills development is discussed first and its effect on the mastery of knowledge considered next.

*a) Impact on Skills Development*

Since students had to do everything by themselves (unlike in more traditional courses where there would be a lecture would point out what would be the correct/best practice, etc), focus group members reported that they learned a lot of new things during the AL sessions and also subsequently in other courses as they applied the very same principles developed in this pilot class. Because nobody told them what the solution was, students had to try to identify, as a team, what they believed the issues were. The author’s observations also show that students were able to understand complex issues and applied theory correctly in the presentations. IPS, such as effective communication and leadership skills, to name a few, seem to have been developed during the course. Moreover, whereas there was not much talking among team members in the first two classes, that changed with time and many lively discussions took place in the later classes, indicating more comfort with teamwork and increased trust.

*b) Impact on Knowledge Mastery*

Students reported that many of them were sceptical at first because there was no lecture and no solution provided by the professor. But as they were asked to look for solutions by themselves

and not to rely on others [e.g. experts], they progressively saw the benefits of the approach. As one student stated. "I really appreciated that I was able to do more self-study and prepare myself. Now I feel I can find solutions myself too". Another student described AL as "an interesting way to learn something new." For some, AL confirmed that "education is far more than bookish knowledge" as "bookish solutions" may not work in the real world. The experience also made a number of them realize that they could trust themselves – and others – to come up with solutions, a valuable lesson indeed. One skill developed by students in this class is their enhanced ability to share work more effectively with others. For some of them this was not a given. One student who identified himself as "a kind of loner" who generally does not like to work with others admitted that being compelled to engage in teamwork taught him to plan his work better. Another merit of working as a group in the context of AL was that the team got the job done in a timely manner. Providing for better planning was also instrumental in the more structured way in which teams organized ourselves (e.g. who was doing what, research on what topic, etc). The role of the learning coach was recognized by students as essential for coordination and planning. Finally, learning coaches felt that they played a key role in motivating other students. As one student noted, "When asked to be the learning coach I struggled a bit, at first [...] but I'm glad I could motivate them [team members] to be part of the team."

**- RQ3: What are the Potential Issues Associated with an AL Course Design?**

Two main issues have been identified in relation to this research question: (a) the AL method itself and (b) learners

*a) The AL Method*

In addressing this issue, it is necessary to divide students into two groups: Asians and non-Asians. Arguably, students from ASEAN countries and from China found the format more challenging than was the case with their non-Asian counterparts. This may be due to the fact that no formal lecture was given – just a case study and instructions to analyze it. Students were not told what to do step by step. As one Chinese student explained, this was a completely new experience: "We were not sure what to do as nobody was telling us what we needed to do. This was very confusing for us in the beginning". For these students from cultures where the emphasis is on conformity with the ingroup and on strong guidelines, this clearly was a major change and somewhat of a shock. But as explained by those same students, their initial confusion turned into a positive experience. In particular, they appreciated the way the class started with questions (and not statements) to tackle the complexity of the issues discussed. For non-Asians, the AL class structure was less of a challenge. One positive aspect the AL approach repeatedly mentioned was that every student was given a chance to express his/her views, which did not have to be knowledge-based. As one student stated, "I have no business experience and didn't know how to contribute. I was surprised that they asked about my opinion. And actually they [the team members] took it seriously. I was really surprised and encouraged that I might be able to contribute".

*(b) Learners*

The comments taken from the qualitative section of the satisfaction questionnaire indicate that overall, the AL approach worked well for students. As pointed out by several of them, the AL sessions forced them to share their views with students from many diversified backgrounds and many different countries and to listen to their views as well. This of course assumes that the teams were multicultural, which was almost always the case. On the one occasion that one group was unequally mixed (it only had one foreign students), this resulted in the rest of the students in that group talking mostly in their mother tongue, precluding that one student from contributing. This particular session outlines the importance of having a diversified group of students in insuring the best possible outcome during action learning sessions.

## 5. Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

One key query in the satisfaction questionnaire was whether students were satisfied with the course ("I was satisfied with the course"). It received an average of 5.21 out of 6, a clear indication of a very high overall level of satisfaction with the course and its design. A very positive aspect of the course design was the course case study (the fictitious insurance company). It introduced a new topic every week. For example, on HR week, students had to deal with several HR issues the company was facing. This gave students an opportunity to explore a whole array of issues and work as if they were real consultants; an experience which they really enjoyed. This outcome is in line with the findings of Schaupp and Vitullo (2019) who effectively implemented a consultancy project as part of a pilot AL MBA course. The main difference, though, was that in their case, this was a real consultancy project. In their learning reflections and focus groups, students acknowledged that it takes time to learn, accept, and correctly implement the AL approach (at least 3 weeks in their own estimation). Past this point, the overall work efficiency of the teams improved dramatically and the pertinence and relevance of the solutions presented were notably higher. Goerlich et al. (2020) determined that if students are confronted with a completely new way of working, as compared, for example, to their undergraduate studies and the place where their previous education took place (e.g. in China, Vietnam, or Indonesia, where they typically had lectures), it will take time for them to adjust. Many students also felt that they had to work harder than in a lecture-based class setting, which caused some initial rejection of the AL class design.

Another very important aspect of the design of that class was the heavy emphasis on teamwork (the whole AL approach is based on this concept). It was, however, an initial great source of concerns among students. In the focus group, they all agreed that the most important skill they had to master was teamwork and also how to achieve positive outcomes. Some students went even as far as saying that the heavy teamwork aspect of the course was the most painful experience for them, particularly at the beginning of the class. These comments are in line with Yeadon-Lee & Worsdale (2012), who reported similar findings. Not everybody in their study appreciated teamwork. Similar findings were found in Johnson and Spicer's (2006) research study. But as was also the case in this AL course, in those two studies, at the same time, students also welcomed the opportunity to develop new valuable skills. Whilst this pilot course received essentially positive feedback from participants, who strongly approved of and supported its overall design and the AL approach, it was not warmly embraced by faculty members. In fact, the reticence to endorse it was such that it was ultimately replaced by an alternative class that followed a more traditional approach. This begs the question of why. For one thing, any change is generally likely to meet with resistance.

This course was no exception. Even before it was launched, there were prejudices against the AL concept itself. Some faculty members also did not think a change was warranted. This lack of openness to new didactic concepts and approaches to learning could be detrimental (or even fatal as this was the case here) to the introduction of new methodologies even though innovation in the classroom is necessary (as it is in any organization). As noted earlier, the introduction, companies are looking for MBA holders well prepared for the challenges ahead. Perhaps, one of the reasons for the lack of enthusiasm among some faculty members was the implication that in an AL course, there is no formal lecture – faculty members assist the learning groups/teams, they do not lecture per say. This may create anxiety among lecturers whose existence as experts would be perceived to be questioned. But this does not have to be. Expertise is still required even though it may manifest itself in a new format. The key point here is that any change is bound to face an uphill battle. Take online teaching. Before Covid-19, the idea of a virtual classroom met with much resistance. It is only when it became mandatory and the only viable option to no class that it gained some acceptance. This may well

be the case with AL courses. This author, along with many researchers, truly believe in the potential of this class design and agree with Belet (2019), who describes it as the most appropriate 'new' management education approach. That overall, the course went surprisingly smoothly augurs well for its future acceptance. This may take time, though. Pressure may come from students themselves, who highly rated this experimental course and may want it to be integrated into the MBA program.

#### - Recommendations and Limitations

Given that the course was designed and implemented in Thailand, where, as reported by Nagi (2016), many lecturers still believe in the concept of one-way lectures and are therefore perhaps more prone to reject a different teaching style. It is therefore recommended that in the future a lecturer from an ASEAN member country be involved in the designing or even co-teach the course. This would provide access to valuable resources and make the project more amenable to those reluctant to embrace new approaches. While such transnational collaboration may not be the norm in Asia, it is quite common in the Western world where interactive teaching styles are quite common. It is also the author's view that some MBA programs in Southeast Asia would benefit from such cooperation. The two main limitations of this study are the small group of students assessed and the sole use of a qualitative method (as opposed to a mixed methodology involving a quantitative analysis that could produce valuable data). Thus, due to these limitations, generalizations cannot be easily made as the results are somehow subjective. Further studies on this topic should therefore involve more participants and perhaps include a quantitative analysis as well.

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**Appendix 1: Focus Group Sample Questions**

<b>Research Objectives</b>	<b>Sample Questions</b>
To evaluate the AL course design from a user experience perspective <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- During the course</li> <li>- Directly after the course</li> <li>- At the end of the program, one year later</li> </ul>	Please describe what you particularly observed during the course and the AL sessions for you and others? What is your overall judgment about the course design and AL approach? Compared to the rest of the MBA program, what was your experience in the AL class?
To evaluate the learning impact of the AL course design in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Skills</li> <li>- Knowledge</li> </ul>	What skills in particular did you build or strengthen in your introductory class? What area of knowledge in particular did you build or strengthen in your introductory class?
To identify possible issues with the AL course design regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The method</li> <li>- Learners</li> </ul>	Have there been any issues or challenges with the course design and/or the AL method for you or your classmates? Have there been any issues or challenges for you personally in this class as compared to other MBA courses?

Source: Compiled by the author for this study