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Exploring students' justifications for studying a master's degree in Business through problem-based learning

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Abstract

Many studies have espoused the pedagogical benefits of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) across multiple disciplines. With the increasing use of PBL within higher education there exists a need to consider its position not just as a pedagogical approach but as a functional instrument in the development and promotion of social capital and status. Drawing on social identity theory (SIT), this study explored Business Masters graduates' justification for undertaking a PBL-based programme. The findings suggest that students discursively elevated the status of the PBL programme they had completed over other alternatives, in an attempt to gain professional mobility. Two primary strategies of *individual mobility* and *social competition* were employed by participants to elevate their position. This paper concludes by problematising the utilisation of pedagogical

approaches as a mechanism for differentiating programmes and graduates within an increasing competitive higher educational landscape.

Keywords: Problem-based learning; post-graduate student; Identity; course choice

Introduction

There are many reported reasons why students seek postgraduate qualifications in business including, inter alia, motivations for self-improvement, career progression, networking opportunities, having a positive impact on society and enhancing one's business skills (Blackburn, 2011). Beyond these cited reasons, engagement in postgraduate studies in the area of business can be as much a process of gaining greater status as it is acquiring further skills and knowledge. For example, research into the reasons why students opt to study MBA-type qualifications suggests that the primary drivers are the desire to gain greater status and access to the networking opportunities that engagement in such study affords (Lueg & Lueg, 2015). Hence, the *social capital* (Bourdieu, 1997) that one gains from such opportunities can be a significant driver for engaging in such programmes. This is supported by Gupta et al (2007) who note that in many MBA programmes students value its placement function as more important than its knowledge function.

Yet access, participation and completion of postgraduate courses in business does not automatically confer higher status. While there is evidence that attending elite universities does afford its graduates opportunities not open to others (Lueng & Lueng, 2015), there are a vast array of business schools not within the elite league of universities that provide programmes of study. For a variety of personal, professional and financial reasons the vast majority of postgraduate business students therefore attend more regional universities and colleges to undertake further

study. More local and regional providers are therefore constantly exploring ways to differentiate themselves from other providers. One such way is in the pedagogical strategy used and recently PBL has been used as a differentiator in this regard (Zabit, 2010).

Despite the vocational and educational benefits of PBL in business education, the extent to which this form of learning confers status on the participant is a matter of debate, particularly if it is outside the ivy league of prestigious universities. One could argue that the status one achieves from them is therefore as much to do with how each participant 'uses' the qualification and how they communicate its value and worth to others. In that context, this research explored the ways in which graduates of a PBL-based Master's degree in business used their qualification to distance themselves from some groups and align themselves to others. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (SIT), what techniques were used by the students to create a cohesive group identity and to distance themselves from other groups? Exploring the extent to which students capitalise on the pedagogical uniqueness of graduate programmes can be of help to educators and programme providers in seeking ways to differentiate their programmes from others. It can also highlight the career focused decisions of graduates in their programme selection and how unique characteristics of a course can be capitalised on by students.

Theoretical framework

To explore this issue, this study drew on the theory of SIT. Social identity is heavily intertwined with individual identity and is related to one's perceived role as a member of a collective (group) as distinct from one's identity as an individual (Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity is the portion of an individual's self-concept derived from personal membership in a relevant social group

(Turner & Oakes, 1986). Flynn (2005) suggests that personal identity is validated by the comparison of the self to others and by confirming one's identity in context with how one believes he/she is perceived by other persons. In his study of student identity within an education context, Flynn (2005) found that students strongly identified with some groups which they perceived as more attractive just as strongly they dis-associated with other groups, perceived as less attractive. According to SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), people can perceive themselves differently at any given moment in time, depending on where they feel they are located on the personal-versus-social identity continuum. At the personal end of this continuum, they think of themselves as individuals and at the social end they consider themselves members of specific social groups.

One of the primary tenets of SIT is that members of a particular *in-group* will attempt to identify negative attributes within a specific *out-group*, which should result in the elevation of their own image or position. Tajfel (1974) suggests that people categorise individuals in the exact same manner; people are predisposed to view the group to which they belong (the *in-group*) as being significantly different from other groups (*out-groups*), and those that may enjoy membership of the same group to share far more characteristics than perhaps they really do.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) propose that status should not be thought of as a scarce resource or even a commodity, such as how power or wealth could be considered. Instead, it is the outcome of comparisons taken place between groups. Furthermore, this process tends to reflect a group's position relative to other groups based on specific attributes. Naturally, the lower a group's status or position relative to comparison groups, the less this group's membership can make to a positive social identity for the individual. Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggest that there are three strategies that people adopt in attempting to alter their position relative to others. These include;

1. Individual Mobility. Brown & Lunt (2002), suggest that the more a person subscribes or believes in the notion of social mobility, the more likely it is that he/she will attempt to join a different group. This activity normally suggests an effort to elevate one's position upward to move away from a lower status group.
2. Social Creativity. The members in a group could attempt to change or even adapt certain attributes of their group. For instance, Lemaine (1974) suggests one way for a group to achieve this is for them to run comparisons between their group and the *out-group* based on a new attribute. Another technique is to alter the values that may be assigned to the attributes of the group to view negative attributes as being more positive than they were previously interpreted, so that comparisons which were previously negative are now perceived as positive. A further method of dealing with this unease is for a specific group to simply change the out-group that is being used for comparison. When the comparison between the in-group and the new out-group creates a more positive result then the feeling of inferiority should reduce in importance and self-esteem increases.
3. Social Competition. Individuals within the group may attempt to elevate their group's position relevant to an out-group. As outlined by Tajfel (1981) individuals might attempt to effect a change of their group's position within the *in-group* and the *out-group* on issues that they might feel are important. In doing so, this might involve creating comparisons between the two groups in question.

SIT is therefore a potentially constructive perspective to explore the ways in which postgraduate students utilise the PBL nature of a master's programme to differentiate themselves within the graduate marketplace.

Methodology

Methodological approach

The research reported in this paper formed part of a larger study into students' experiences of a PBL programme. With the goal of gaining an in-depth, holistic understanding of participants' experience of a PBL-based programme, an interpretivist approach was seen as ideally suited to the study. The study sought to explore participants' understanding of the nature and meaning of their experiences (Hirschman, 1986). This required gaining access to rich, contextualised accounts of individual participant experiences within the master's programme and for that reason semi-structured interviews were selected to explore the participants' experiences. This enabled the researcher to dig deeper into the specifics of the experience, uncovering aspects to which individuals associate the most meaning and value.

Research setting

The research was undertaken in a higher education institution in Ireland. The institution offered a full and part-time master's programme in Business and Marketing delivered through PBL. The programme was considered one of the flagship programmes of the business school and has been in existence for almost 10 years. The programme has enrolled approximately 10-12 students each year. Relative to other more traditional programmes in the institution the programme had a PBL learning framework at its core. The PBL approach resulted in students being introduced to teams from the onset and tackling problems throughout the programme. The students followed a PBL process adapted from the model created Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2010). Although it must be noted that while the larger study was interested in their view of PBL, this article was aimed at exploring how they utilised the programme as a form of professional differentiation. Another aspect of the programme, in comparison to other programmes offered in the institution, was its engagement with local businesses where the students were tasked with addressing real problems

faced by these cooperating businesses. This partnership with external entities made the problems authentic in nature and were seen a significant motivator for the students. While acknowledging that many master's programmes in the field of business adopt a PBL approach and involve engagement with external companies, this was not common within the institution, hence this aspect of the course was presented as an important and unique differentiator.

All students from three previous cohorts were written to inviting them to participate in the study. Of the 38 students written to, 13 responded indicating their willingness to participate. In terms of gender, five were male and the remaining eight were female providing a 38% (M) / 62% (F) gender mix. All participants in this study were volunteers and over the age of eighteen. Furthermore, participants were all from the part-time programme and attended the Institute one evening each week for a three-hour session and one Saturday each month for eight hours. These part-time students were aged twenty-eight years on average in full-time employment. These past students were subsequently interviewed by a researcher independent of the original programme. As part of the larger study, the students were asked a range of questions seeking their overall experiences of the programme. Including what initially attracted them to the programme, why they chose it, what were their thoughts in relation to the pedagogical approach used, the assessment structures and the content of the programme. The sample proved sufficient in achieving a level of data saturation as the data of the initial 13 respondents was analysed and occurrences of new themes and issues levelled off as the analysis of the 13 interviews was completed. This figure for saturation of themes in this type of in-depth qualitative data is common and noted by others (see Guest et al (2006)).

The study was approved by the university's ethics board and participation on the study was completely voluntary. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time and anonymity was guaranteed from the onset. Names used in the reporting are pseudonyms to protect

the participants' anonymity. Interviews with the participants were semi-structured in nature and explored areas such as role descriptions, PBL assessments, mobility and the general student experience of the programme. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. Following the interview all recordings were transcribed for analysis. Mindful of the theoretical framework guiding the study, a thematic analysis was undertaken using deductive coding identifying the three strategies of SIT that people adopt in attempting to alter their position relative to others, namely: attempts to position themselves as part of a new group (individual mobility), making comparisons between themselves and others to present the self in a positive light (social competition) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Techniques of *social creativity* were not significant in the data and therefore not presented in the findings. This is perhaps to be expected given that the PBL nature of the programme was already recognised by participants as a positive feature, hence there was no need to create a new more positive attribute for more favourable comparisons with external groups.

Findings

Individual Mobility – Professional Elevation

The first part of the analysis sought evidence of individual mobility. As SIT outlines, in certain situations where the group borders are viewed as being non-permanent, individuals may engage in individual mobility strategies where they "disassociate from the group and pursue individual goals designed to improve their personal lot rather than that of their in-group" (Haslam, 2001, p. 38). There were a significant number of students who appeared to see their participation in the programme as a *mobility* project. For instance, there were over 60 statements across the interviews where the students spoke about their wish to create a recognisable difference between the undergraduate student cohort they graduated with and many appeared to view PBL as a means of achieving this distancing. The PBL programme was therefore perceived as a differentiator that

assisted them in their career progression. Interestingly, some students mentioned PBL as a means of achieving this distance rather than just a master's degree, it appears that they have constructed a PBL-master's programme in a more positive light than a standard, non-PBL master's qualification. In this way it appeared that the status of the *in-group* was being elevated as a result of their participation and association with the PBL programme. The following comments highlight the way in which they aimed to distance themselves from their former graduate group by obtaining this qualification;

"I guess I was also trying to differentiate myself from the gang I graduated with ... I knew that they didn't have PBL under their belts. ... the world is competitive and I saw this as a way of elevating my position within the marketplace" (Frank).

"This would make me more attractive when it came to looking for a new job, that I'd be seen as being superior to all the others out there that I went to college with" (Aidan)

"I knew that if I did a PBL master course then that would help me progress at work ... I felt like I was better than the rest by doing this course" (Mary)

Leaving the groups they formerly associated with was also driven by the financial rewards as well as the status. Dan, for example, assigned a high earning potential to those that had graduated from the PBL programme and gave his reason for enrolling in the programme as having a desire to join this group.

"I know this probably sounds a bit shallow and all that, but these guys make serious money, I wanted to be in that group and this was one way to do it" (Dan)

Achieving the Master's award appeared to confer automatic membership of this new group. For example, Mary believed that she could now participate with colleagues in the workplace on real-life projects as she felt she now had the credentials to join this group.

“It was great to be able to talk to colleagues about these projects that we were doing for these real-life companies you know. That I could do this too, just like them” (Mary)

In this manner the programme is being used as a means of achieving *individual mobility*, to move from one group to another, with several different goals in mind.

As well as aspiring to join a more elevated group there was also an effort to distance themselves from the group they perceived themselves to be currently part of. For example, Mary felt that she was being left behind by her contemporaries and therefore enrolled on the programme to elevate her position away from this less desirable group she associated herself with.

“Also, I think I was being left behind a bit by my college friends, they were getting lots of experience and I just wanted to keep up with them if that makes any sense” (Mary)

Social Competition – talking up and talking down

There were over 35 statements made by the participating students in total across the interviews supporting the role played by social competition within the programme. With *social competition* individuals within the *in-group* seek positive differences against some particular *out-group* or highlight negative aspects of the outgroup that they are not associated with. In-group favoritism refers to the practice of favoring an individual belonging to one's own group in comparison to another group. Examples of Social competition as a technique applied by students emerged as the comment from Anne (below) demonstrates when she was asked whether she would recommend a

PBL programme to a friend. Her response emphasised that not all her friends would be suitable for PBL. She believed only a select few could possess the same ability as her fellow students on her course. This view was because she saw her cohort as being “exceptional” students and therefore used this as a benchmark for comparison. She employed keywords such as “committed, very dedicated and quite disciplined” to describe her in-group and suggested that only her friends that measure up to this standard would be suitable.

“Yes, but not every friend. It’s a certain kind of person that is suited to PBL and there will be people that will do a taught Masters and will succeed far more in a taught masters. People that are...are suited to sit in there for 5 hours learning from the book and there’s people that don’t learn from that and there’s people that work better from the PBL approach. So yeah, I would recommend it but not to all friends. I think friends who would be as good as the guys in the group right now. Those that maybe had work experience, friends who I know would be a very committed, very dedicated and quite disciplined at what they do and I suppose determined as well, it might suit them for sure. I look at my group that I was with last year and they were just exceptional I think” (Anne)

Other examples of *social competition* included Frank’s contention that the programme resulted in a bond being established with his fellow students, even those that he may not have held in much affection prior to starting the course. His use of the term “us versus them” to describe his feelings towards those without a PBL background highlights the way he is creating distance between the ingroup and outgroup.

“I knew some of the guys from before we actually started and I have to say, I didn’t particularly like them. But then after a while we were all in this together, we were better

than those without a PBL grounding. It sounds a bit nuts but it was like it was us versus them” (Frank)

Purposefully favouring members of the ingroup compared to members of the outgroup is a critical aspect of social competition. This was also evident in the participants’ comments. For example, Stuart described how he would only refer new business opportunities to fellow PBL graduates before looking at those without the PBL qualification. He justified this discrimination on the grounds that he could “trust” those with a PBL background to do a satisfactory job as any referrals he made that did not meet high standards could affect his personal credibility;

“The way it worked for me was that I’d only give the name of some guy from the course, whenever I was asked to name someone good, whenever a bit business came up and I was asked to name someone. I’d always feel more comfortable with someone from the course, I knew they’d be good. Even if I didn’t know them personally. Once they’d been through our PBL course I knew my name was safe” (Stuart)

In the final example of *social competition*, Dan commented how once a student was a “PBL student” he would consider them to be different from the others, different from those graduating with a traditional (non-PBL) qualification and that this was what set them apart in his perspective.

“Once I knew that someone had that PBL stamp on their head, they were different to the rest. I felt they were one of us and we were better than the rest because of the shared experience we had been through and the training we had received. I felt that each of us were better than the rest” (Dan)

Looking at the findings in their entirety it is evident that the students both used the course to elevate their status from the current positions and differentiated themselves from their counterparts, particularly their undergraduate cohort and fellow colleagues.

Discussion

The application of SIT as a theoretical perspective proved a worthwhile lens to unearth the individual mobility and social competition at play. As the study has found, students entered the PBL programme primarily to engage in professional mobility. They perceived the programme as a clear means of elevating themselves over and above those that they viewed as being competitors and sought to join social groups that were seen to be more attractive professionally. While such professional mobility is not unique to this study, the use of PBL as the differentiator is novel. The question arises as to whether this perception of superiority associated with the PBL master's course was created through the marketing of the programme by the institute or created by the students as a means of justifying their choice of programme. The marketing documentation as part of the programme did highlight the vocational relevance of the PBL approach to the programme but it did not position the programme as being more elite or relevant than other programmes. Hence it would appear that the elitist manner in which the programme was communicated by past students was constructed by the student cohort. This is perhaps not surprising when looked at through the lens of SIT where students will construct positive accounts of their ingroup, based on some particular characteristic (in this case its PBL nature), while simultaneously comparing it more favourably to outgroups.

The PBL component of the programme has been therefore used very effectively as a differentiator for the students and for their self-promotion. In many ways what has emerged here is the view that it is the perception of distinctiveness that is more important than genuine, tangible distinctiveness. The institute in which the programme was offered was not highly ranked amongst the third-level institutes in Ireland and hence the students could not necessarily draw on the status and prestige of the institution as a differentiator. In this way it could be argued that in highlighting the PBL nature of the programme as a differentiator, as opposed to the prestige of the business

school and its faculty, the students were engaging in a level of social creativity in that they were redefining the institute by another criteria, rather than the normal criteria by which it is judged. It is perhaps the absence of more traditional markers of status, such as institutional prestige, that has led them to highlight the PBL nature as a differentiator. The extent to which the PBL nature of the programme did confer an advantage to the graduates was not the focus of this study and indeed whether or not it did is largely irrelevant. Instead, the most significant aspect of this study is the manner in which the students used this PBL ‘tag’ as a differentiator. This study therefore highlights how students can creatively use distinctive characteristics as a positive differentiator, regardless of the pedagogical merits of the programme.

The findings highlight that completion of the course per se does not automatically confer greater professional recognition on the students. Instead, students play a far more active role in this social mobility process. They not only construct the differentiating arguments in relation to their qualifications and downplay aspects that would tarnish this narrative, but they also cement this perspective by communicating it to others and by favouring past graduates of the same course. Hence this form of social mobility is an active process where the student has a significant amount of agency. Further research could explore the presence of potential different discourses across institutions of varying levels of prestige and the extent to which individual mobility and social competition is as prevalent in other programmes.

At a time of crisis in funding in the higher education sector in Ireland, all institutions are operating in an evermore competitive environment to attract students to their business schools. For the more prestigious institutions with both national and international reaches, the status and prestige alone can be sufficient to attract sufficient applicants. However, for other providers they must identify unique differentiators that capture students’ interest. The course at the focus of this study appears

to have achieved this which is commendable in the current environment. Further research could examine what techniques of social competition do the graduates of different programmes use to differentiate themselves from graduates of other, similar programmes from other institutions. Specifically, do they associate themselves as part of a larger group of master's graduates, regardless of the institution they studied in, or to what extent does inter-institutional rivalry and competition exist.

Conclusions

Individuals strive to increase their social identity by moving to other more attractive groups and in this instance, a PBL education was perceived as being an enabler to help effect this social mobility. The motivation to engage in *professional mobility* by students through this PBL programme is key for education managers and educators in general to understand as it not only supports the view within extant literature that education assists social mobility but also that prospective students will create the rationale for this mobility themselves through creating narratives to describe both themselves and their *in-group* in a highly positive light. What was clear was that the Problem-based Learning 'stamp' became a very compelling differentiator for these students, particularly in the absence of more traditional differentiators of status such as institutional prestige. The extent to which institutions however wish to capitalise on these attempts to create an elitist image related to the programme is something that needs consideration. The past students' attempts to elevate their status and distance themselves from their past cohorts appeared like they were 'pulling up the ladder behind them'. At one level this discourse of elitism is a very powerful marketing tool for future potential applicants, on the other hand, it could advance the worst of academic elitism that many regional institutions, such as the one at the focus of this study, work hard to challenge.

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