ARTS-BASED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: CREATIVITY AS A COLLABORATIVE OUTCOME IN AN ONLINE MBA PROGRAM

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Over the past decade, the arts-based learning movement has gained momentum in both organizations and business schools. Extending beyond logical-analytical ways of knowing, artistic activities afford opportunities to explore various management and organizational issues creatively. Traditionally, artful experiential activities occurred in physical spaces. However, with the proliferation of online education, there is a need to consider applying artistic methods through experiential learning exercises in virtual learning communities. In addition, the 2020 global pandemic forced business schools to reconsider where and how business education takes place. This paper describes an arts-based activity assigned to graduate students in the context of an experiential learning exercise designed to explore the purpose of their online MBA. Some individuals perceive themselves as unable to be creative. This paper employs the alternative perspective that creativeness can be collaborative, as opposed to merely individual practice. Narrative accounts from students illustrate their experiences with artistic, creative assignments in the virtual world. The authors conclude with practical implications and suggestions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Artistic activities in business schools and organizations are gaining popularity (Adler 2006; 2015; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009; 2014; Barry & Mesiek, 2015; Katz-Buononconto, 2015; Van Buskirk, London, & Plump, 2018). The arts-based movement challenges traditional logical-analytical approaches, inspiring creative and innovative forms of experiential education. As Darso (2014) points out, it is becoming increasingly important for management educators to embrace uncertainty by designing for pedagogical spaces that stimulate “authentic leadership and co-
creation” (p. 14). These types of practices include an array of activities such as drawing, painting, poetry, music, dance, drama, storytelling, and studio craft, to mention a few. Initially, artful methods were primarily directed at the individual level (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009), focusing on leadership development (Adler, 2006; 2015; 2016). Recent approaches seek to engage participants in collaborative artistic activities (Barry & Meisiek, 2015; Statler & Guillet de Monthoux, 2015) to explore various management and organizational issues. Online educational environments pose opportunities and challenges for expanding artful methods into virtual platforms. This paper describes playful experiments with virtual art practices in the context of an MBA course. A collective component is designed for students to engage in a storied experiential approach that explores the purpose of their online MBA.

**BACKGROUND**

Given the rise of online MBA programs, there is a growing interest in understanding virtual teams and experiential practices (Hwang, 2018). This understanding is essential given the changes in how management education happens in a COVID-19 environment (Schmidt-Wilk, 2020). Management learning and education scholarship inspire the experiential practices described in this paper. First, Ruth’s (2017) study on ‘what’s the MBA for’ presents an iterative analysis of student essays to construct thematic understandings on its purpose. Ruth’s approach draws inspiration from the literature on storytelling archetypes to seek more profound insights on what students are trying to accomplish by pursuing an MBA. It looks for sensemaking beyond cost-benefit or simple explicit motivational approaches. Similar to Inkson’s (2004) seminal research on career metaphors, Ruth’s inductive qualitative method codes and organizes themes to generate a more complex purpose-driven “web of stories” (p. 11): *The Show Goes On, The Quest, Born Again, Deus ex Machina, The Voyage, The Servant and The Big Apple*. Basic features of these storied types are outlined below in Table 1.

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<tr>
<th>Basic Feature</th>
<th>The Show Goes On</th>
<th>The Quest</th>
<th>Born Again</th>
<th>Deus ex Machina</th>
<th>The Voyage</th>
<th>The Servant</th>
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<td>Natural progression or step in life/career</td>
<td>Search for meaning/self-exploration</td>
<td>Re-birth/Transformation</td>
<td>‘Get me out of here’ exit strategy</td>
<td>Specific application for current life/career</td>
<td>Purpose bigger than oneself</td>
<td>Concerns with self-interest/status</td>
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*Created from Ruth (2017)*
See Ruth’s (2017) study for narrative details on these storied themes. Musings on the purpose of pursuing an online MBA provide an opportunity to extend this research. Second, designing for a collaborative artistic activity to explore the reason for an online MBA builds on Mack’s (2013) collective artifact-making study. While Mack’s work addresses experiential activities in traditional classrooms, it offers the initial direction for investigating these types of practices in online settings. Similarly, Ruth’s ideas may resonate with students’ experiences, providing common ground for online learner community engagement.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXT

This investigation examines the collaborative artistic practices employed in an online Organizational Behavior MBA course. Since organizational behavior is part of the program’s foundational core, it is often one of the first MBA courses taken by a student. Thus, for some students, this course is also their first experience with online education. Their reasons for pursuing an MBA and doing it in the virtual environment are salient aspects of their recent decision to enter the program. Students must learn how to navigate the learning management system (LMS), engage in an accelerated learning process limited to approximately eight weeks, and master the course concepts. Unlike some quantitative courses, many of the concepts studied in organizational behavior courses prompt students to reflect on the importance of establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Student reflections happen through discussion posts, blogs, team activities, and other technology-driven means in the online environment. Achieving maximum learner understanding in online qualitative graduate-level courses requires instructors to engage students in more than LMS navigation pointing to course concepts. As Perry (2017) states, students must go beyond ‘click-through’ content.

Experiential Learning

By design, the online MBA program promotes applied learning, skill sets, and conceptual learning. Active learning processes are an integral part of skill and application development (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Morgan, Martin, Howard & Mihalek, 2005). Experiential learning is an essential process because it creates knowledge “through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Rodriguez and Fekula (2019) differentiated zones of experiential learning from zones of concept/content learning in their examination of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE Rubrics (see: https://www.aacu.org/value). The AAC&U Integrative Learning Value Rubric (AAC&U, 2009b) identifies the importance of connecting relevant experience and academic knowledge. Learners who attain this goal can develop or select examples from experience that inform academic concepts. The AAC&U rubric cites family life, artistic participation, civic involvement, and work experience as examples that yield experience.

In contrast, lower levels of experience and learning attainment fail to illuminate academic concepts. Experiences must be relevant to the learning goal and sufficiently rich to achieve Kolb’s (1984) learning transformation. The Zone of Experiential Learning (Rodriguez & Fekula, 2019)
circumscribes the AAC&U Integrative Learning VALUE Rubric aspects that achieve experiential change (see Figure 1).

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<th>Zone of Experiential Learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>Connections to Experience</td>
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<td>Capstone</td>
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Meaningfully synthesizes connections among experiences outside of the formal classroom (including life experiences and academic experiences such as internships and travel abroad) to deepen understanding of fields of study and to broaden own points of view.

Effectively selects and develops examples of life experiences, drawn from a variety of contexts (e.g., family life, artistic participation, civic involvement, work experience), to illuminate concepts/theories/frameworks of fields of study.

Compares life experiences and academic knowledge to infer differences, as well as similarities, and acknowledge perspectives other than own.

Identifies connections between life experiences and those academic texts and ideas perceived as similar and related to own interests.

**Figure 1.** Zones of Experiential Learning in a Value Rubric (adapted from Rodriguez and Fekula (2019) and the AAC&U Integrative Learning Value Rubric, see: https://www.aacu.org/value)

An effective experiential activity ensures that the learner can apply skills learned experientially to future endeavors (Leong & Crowley, 2007). While researchers are interested in the empirical relationship between learning and performance outcomes from an experiential activity, Bernard (2004) suggests that simply differentiating by performance is enough for prospective employers, regardless of learning outcomes. Accreditation agencies such as AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) initiated calls for experiential learning long ago (Biggs & Gulkus, 1988; Boscia & McAfee, 2008). AACSB has sustained its demand through the 2020 Guiding Principles and Standards (AACSB, 2020, July 28), with curriculum standard 4.3 requiring experiential learning. Lord and Newson (1977) recommend varied and balanced teaching tactics which promote Windsor’s (1984) notion of ‘pedagogical pluralism.’ Ultimately, an experience transforms and informs the learner’s educational enterprise.

**Creativity, Art, & Experiential Learning in the Virtual World**

Creativity and its impacting factors comprise a complex process. The generation of appropriate ideas, the acceptance of novelty, and the exploration of imagined alternatives are some dimensions of creativity (Fekula, 2011). Emotional intelligence impacts the acceptance of novelty (Brookfield, 1987; Goleman, 1995), and critical thinking skills drive the exploration of alternatives (Fekula,). These factors explain why some individuals believe that they are not creative. Novelty can produce an emotional reaction and cause decision-makers to reject new ideas without full consideration. Even if one’s tolerance for ambiguity and newness is high, individuals might lack the capability to differentiate appropriate from inappropriate ideas. To address the complexity of
the process, learners must see creativeness as a collaborative practice using diverse perspectives within a group.

Diverse perspectives are especially valuable when dealing with art. Despite being one of the earliest forms of communication, predating written text, art remains subject to interpretation. Whether explicit or implicit, art is a fundamental communicative medium. For example, artwork provides the medium to develop students’ understanding of epistemology (Fekula, 2005). Art can communicate belief systems, perspective, and visual, empirical, and abstract realities (Fekula; Gombrich, 1995; Gowing, 1995).

It is advantageous to use art to conduct experiential learning in the virtual world. While technology alters the experience of verbal and textual communication, art is generally impervious to the influence of modern methods. The adage that ‘a picture is worth 1000 words’ does not change the essence of the picture, even if subject to multiple interpretations. In contrast, authors warn that even simple and innocuous e-mails can use text that yields unintended consequences (Case, 2016; Ranjan, 2017). As educators, we craft our words to avoid misinterpretation. Unlike readings, we expect that most students would engage in art from an interpretive perspective. Of course, texts produced in artistic forms, e.g., poetry, scripts, and stories, are subject to interpretation.

The use of art in the classroom as an experiential exercise is unlimited in scope. Cartoon imagery conveys concepts in both engineering (Zapata, Olaya, & Fekula, 2010) and business (Ketchen, Short, Combs, & Terrell, 2011). However, art is not limited to imagery. Renowned literature, poetry, and lyrics create images subject to interpretation. Movies provide practical educational experiences for learners, but “films do not teach themselves” (Kelly, 2019, para 4). Instructors develop accompanying materials to illustrate the alignment of movie scenes with numerous concepts from the textbook (Fekula & Sharbrough, 2016). The virtual world supports video analysis through short clips and streaming services.

Grasha (1996) classifies teaching methods according to levels of active learning and risk. Whether artistic imagery or objective text, importing known materials into the classroom mitigates the risks associated with experiential exercises. High active learning accompanied by low risk offers instructors some control over outcomes. However, richer engagements carry risk but provide more transformative experiences. High active learning accompanied by increased risk implies an unpredicted outcome. Such activities include learners teaching each other, presentations by students in small groups, guided imagery exercises, students designing sessions, and discussions with the whole class after students have prepared a product outside of class (Grasha).

In the online MBA class considered here, the instructor groups learners and assigns them to produce an artifact representing their purpose in pursuing the degree. The collaborative effort requires high activity because learners have little other instructor guidance. Creating an artifact requires high engagement to imagine possible outcomes. Since an effective process requires appropriate ideas, assent to novelty, and critical thinking, risk accompanies the exercise. The instructor mitigates the risk by conducting the process in groups. The input of diverse group members offers a higher probability of a transformative outcome as individuals wrestle with the
ambiguity of producing an artistic representation of their group’s purpose in pursuing their MBA degree. Some evidence suggests that visual representations help learners who might otherwise struggle to understand previously unexplored ideas (Zapata, Olaya, & Fekula, 2010). The goal of this exercise is for the learner to visualize their purpose through a tangible artifact. The experience transforms learners as they engage in the creative process.

**Career and Professional Pathways**

Business education requires learning in functional disciplines and engaging in career readiness activities (Bear, 2016; Bridgstock, 2005; King, 2004). AACSB Guiding Principles and Standards (AACSB, 2020, July 28) state that degree program curricula should “include relevant competencies that prepare graduates for business careers” (p. 38) and “include preparation for . . . thinking creatively, making sound decisions and exercising good judgment under uncertainty” (p. 39). Further, AACSB Standard 6 (AACSB) specifies “support for career development” (p. 46).

Learners should understand why they are pursuing a degree and where it will take them (Rodriguez & Fekula, 2017). An arts-based approach provides a rich opportunity for the learner to delve deeper into understanding themselves in the context of their education. While traditional approaches might result in superficial conclusions such as promotions, pay raises, or new jobs, the artifact exercise requires collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. The process represents the complexity of the issue and supports those individuals who might otherwise avoid the challenge of creative endeavors.

**VIRTUAL ARTS-BASED LEARNING: ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXT**

Collaborative artistic work takes place in the final course module. This assignment sequence ensures exposure to enough course elements to provide the material for collective arts-based learning. In a recent review of arts in management education, Meisiek, Guillet de Monthoux, Austin, and Barry (2016) recommend a scaffolding approach to artistic activities. In response, the instructor conducted several phases of this process during the semester.

**Phase 1: Course Introductions**

Initial discussions include an opportunity for MBA students to introduce themselves to the other online learning community members. Students reflect on the changing nature of work during these introductions through a common reference point by reading a McKinsey & Company report (Boland, DeSmet, Palter, & Sanghvi, 2020). The reading updates the status of work and organizational life and complements their 2019 pre-pandemic course textbook. From the beginning of the course, participants are reflecting on alternative work arrangements. A sample of student statements on alternate work arrangements appears in Figure 2.
With numerous daily meetings daily, seeing other’s faces has become somewhat unnecessary for me. The remote work landscape is more about movement of information, by any means possible, as efficiently as possible. Interpersonal communication skills may take a hit as a result of our changed work routines and environments. Referencing my INTJ personality, I personally am adjusted and very content in my remote lifestyle. I am unsure if I have a real desire to return to full-time in office work. I am very interested to hear how others have adjusted to the changes in the workforce across various industries.

Remote and digital worker trends have been on the rise for the past two decades but have been generally frowned upon by “traditional” organizations that have managerialist tendencies. The pandemic forced many businesses to play catch up, and now that capital has been spent on creating secure and robust remote work protocols, it may be the new way forward. “Organizations must … use this moment to break from the inertia of the past by dispensing with suboptimal old habits and systems” (Boland et al., 2020).

We are evaluating our practices and deciding what to keep and what to let go. Working at from home has worked well for many of our employees. As referenced in the reading, many have found themselves to be more productive, gaining a couple of hours in the day from the old commute. However, some of our staff are not enjoying the separation because they feel isolated and disconnected. So, what does this mean? Bring everyone back in or allow each individual to decide? Sell a property to free up capital? The new normal is working through the next round of uncertainties.

The shift from face-to-face meetings to the Microsoft Teams collaboration platform has become the norm for meetings. This experience for me has highlighted how in certain areas, work is able to be equally as productive without being onsite. This is a culture change regarding the ‘work from home’ mindset. My organization recently started the “Reconstruct how work is done” step by beginning to redefine several processes that previously had in-office expectations, but may be tackled through online collaboration tools. All signs point to the future norm for my organization to be a more hybrid environment with in-office and tele-work.

The student comments suggest that there is some degree of resignation to a forever-changed work world. Online collaboration has become the norm. Another theme is the impact of capital investment on future work environments. This theme suggests that cost factors might determine work environments instead of traditional perceptions that business relationships depend upon personal contact. Finally, the current online learner perspectives indicate that they can better handle experiential exercises in an online context more than ever before.

**Phase 2: Leadership and Arts-based Learning**

In 2006, Nancy Adler, an artist and business professor at McGill University, legitimized arts-based learning for management education (Mack 2013) in *Academy of Management Learning and Education*. Amongst her many subsequent academic works, Adler’s (2016) *Harvard Business*
Review article establishes practical connections between leadership and art. The instructor for this course selected the article because of its experiential framing for an individual blog activity introducing students to the potential value of arts-informed activities. By sharing one of her watercolors, Adler invites the viewer to allow ‘art’ to ignite the imagination. She suggests this painting or an alternative piece of art for the viewer to engage in a three-minute reflection. Adler shows that learners can connect artful thinking and leadership development. In other words, this initial experiential activity affords opportunities for each student to consider the value of art for the viewer to engage in a three-minute reflection. Adler invites the viewer to allow ‘art’ to ignite the imagination. She suggests this initial experiential activity affords opportunities for each student to consider the value of artistic approaches to learning and knowing. Adler invites readers to relate the artwork to their own leadership challenges or other personally meaningful experiences to spark participants’ imaginations. Students describe their experience with this arts-based learning technique in the sample blogs below. The instructor used this activity in numerous prior courses where students reveal the potential to generate insights through art. As part of online engagement, students respond with substantive comments on peers’ artistic reflections (See Figure 3).

I first looked at Adler’s water color, all I could see was fall foliage. Within about 15-20 seconds, my eyes began to look through the image and the black parts began to draw me in as if looking into a kind of black holes in space or dark tunnels. I could almost feel myself falling in. Candidly, I got lost in the dark for a moment and my mind wandered to daydreaming. When I refocused, I saw ghost like figures in the white parts. After the ghosts seemed to do a little dance for a moment, the gold flecks began to sparkle and the painting seemed like a treasure chest overflowing with a pirate’s booty. As the timer went off, my brain was startled and once again I saw just fall foliage with one big leaf front and center. The exercise revealed that it often pays to look beyond the surface. In allowing my eye and mind to dive “into” the art, I had a different perspective when I returned to the surface. Almost like looking at the other side of a three-dimensional object. The activity reminds me that I’ve already started to ‘pigeon-hole’ someone at work. I plan to work on seeing this person from a different perspective.

I used an art piece (watercolor print) in my parent’s house to analyze using art as a reflection trigger. I do not see any artist listed on the print. I have always enjoyed this print for its abstractness and colors and adding richness to my parent’s entrance. After focusing on the print for approximately three minutes, I noticed the various shades of blue and green with a sharp contrast of purple running through it. The print looks like leaves or threads sprawling across the canvas. Continuing to focus, the colors became brighter and pointed in an upright direction.

With the current situation of the economy and political and social unrest, the print gives new hope as we forge ahead. Leaves/threads going in different directions reflects the hidden complexity of the world as we know it today. No one would have surmised a world pandemic and unrest far beyond what we could have imagined. The print reveals limitless opportunities in colors reaching to the sky. This connects with a desire to move forward
in my life’s work as a human being who respects all individuals. The print eludes bright colors and reaches for the sky – so do I! While I know that someone else may view this print differently, but this is my interpretation and it works for me. Tomorrow, my imagination with this print may take me into a different direction.

I believe that art serves to ignite the imagination by challenging us to think in new and different ways – to break the rut in business thinking. While a business degree gives me the common language to communicate with my peers, this can also become a communication crutch, stuck in the same dialogue. I very much enjoyed this exercise as it invited business thought in a different framework. This is the point: to get us to tease out new perspectives by using an unconventional tool for most of us.

I never considered my artistic ability or overall creativity to be strengths of mine. Part of this is likely because I’ve never attempted to ignite or challenge my imagination in ways required by this activity. Art allows us to channel imagination by challenging us to see things that we normally wouldn’t see and allowing us to reflect on what we are seeing and why. The interesting thing about art and this exercise is that we all likely saw something different and none of us are wrong for doing so, it’s simply our imagination at work as we look to make sense of what we are seeing and what is going on around us.

Figure 3. Student Statements on Peers’ Artistic Reflections

In each case, viewing the artwork served to ignite the learner’s imagination to the point where they stated precisely that. As mentioned earlier, idea generation, novelty, and examining imagined alternatives are dimensions of creativity. Thus, viewing creative work starts the creative process.

Phase 3: The Power of Storytelling

Students work in groups throughout the course. During a lesson on groups and communication, the teams create a virtual presentation that reflects the storied purpose of their MBA. This assignment allows the group members to get to know each other (Mack, 2019) while exploring Ruth’s (2017) article regarding the purpose of an MBA. Each member reads and reflects on how their own ‘purpose’ resonates with one of the seven thematic metaphors. In the presentation, groups compare and contrast their chosen metaphors. Groups also include a narrative reflecting on the power of storytelling for group communication. They are also encouraged to consider how the final collaborative project focusing on online MBAs will differ from or be similar to the initial team assignment. The following sample reflections in Figure 4 illustrate learner reactions to Phase 3.

Due to this project, we have a much better understanding of each other’s purpose for pursuing an MBA. We each read the article and made individual postings to include the different themes. Results of our individual postings varied but the strongest point that all
of us felt influenced our choice was “Born Again”. This involves a point where each of us decided to change the directions of our lives, careers, or personal goals. Whether this change brought us to this program, or we are hoping the program will facilitate that change, our pursuance of an MBA degree is the linchpin. Our results also resulted in 2 people feeling a degree of association in the areas of “Deus ex Machina”, “The Quest”, and “The Voyage.

What makes storytelling so powerful is personal traits. We could have the same story told to us by multiple people but depending on the person telling the story is what makes it more of a unique experience. For example, none of us can tell the other group members’ MBA pursuit story better than the group member who felt the connection with that story. Using reflexivity, we use the storytelling of each group member to further understand another MBA pursuit story that did not relate to us as much as the one we chose ourselves. With storytelling being so unique to the narrator of the story, it opens an opportunity for everyone to communicate from their point of view. It also gives everyone a chance to participate. This is when ideas can be exchanged, and feedback can be given without negativity or criticism. Everyone in the group had their own story to tell. The diversity of the stories presented by each group member helps paint a meaningful picture to the audience. Although we have different experiences, we all relate to one another.

For the final activity, we may create a visualization of our team’s online MBA story. While this course has taught the value of reflexivity and sensemaking by using art, we will need to utilize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of any team member’s experience with a specific medium (e.g. painting, drawing, or video). Since we are beginning to know our team members, the increased comfort level will help with the final assignment.

If we are able to personalize the activity with those we are working with and engage on a more emotional level (as opposed to strictly literal and just following directions), we are more apt to get energized and synergized involvement for the final project. The concept of applying an ‘artful approach to collectively explore the ‘storied purpose’ of the online MBA’ sounds fascinating. We are familiar with some tools and have some ideas. We are also excited to find other available resources.

Figure 4. Student Statements on Storytelling

The storied purpose framework gives learners a structure to direct their creative forces to communicate with other group members. In particular, members are more apt to accept novelty since they do it within an established framework. As one learner indicated, the framework allows them to give feedback without negativity or criticism. Before the final project, the groups have one more opportunity to build their collaborative capacity through an organizational culture case assignment.
Phase 4: Creativity Killers

The final individual reflection addresses creativity killers in the workplace. The authors of the textbook used in this course (Clegg, Kornberger, Pitsis & Mount, 2019) provide a humorous list of ten managerial routines that can kill creativity. This comedic lens tends to resonate with MBA students as each considers their own experiences with creativity killers at work. Thus, at least partially, the instructor can design this activity to encourage students to approach the final arts-based project creatively. Figure 5 provides a sample of student reactions to creativity killers.

In a previous position, the manager assigned me to a group to revamp our onboarding process. She would check our progress every week while making strong suggestions on what we should enact. This hindered my group from creating a new process from our own think tank as we eventually had to go with my manager's ideas. Unfortunately, good management practices can work against creativeness. Although leadership may smile on a manager who strictly follows policy and tightly manages their team, that same team may feel pin-holed. Pablo Picasso stated "learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist".

My mind ran wild when I read “How to Kill Creativity” in the text. In my various lines of work over the past…I have seen them all. For example, from a previous workplace, the production manager always found a way to put a kibosh on great ideas with [management speak]. In another situation, the manager was the nicest of people, but he knew every nook and cranny of the handbook and could aim it well in shooting down a fun project.

In a recent position, most individuals at my level rarely spoke up with new ideas because nothing would ever come of them. It’s as if management would try to make you feel good but never take it seriously. For example, every morning and afternoon we had to give status checks on our personal progress. I understand how it is important for work to be accomplished, but constant progress checks can grow more annoying to comply with each day.

I must admit, I chuckled a bit when reading the ten items from our text. Not that they were funny at all, but that I could look back at my organization and think of scenarios where most of these took place. The tough part is when I mentally saw myself doing some of these things. Of course, my failures in this were acceptable, because my intentions were pure, but that old boss of mine, he was terrible. That’s what we do every single day. Judge others on their actions and ourselves on our intentions.

Figure 5. Student Statements on Creativity Killers
As previously discussed, learners must accept novelty and imagine and explore alternatives to generate appropriately creative ideas. A lack of emotional intelligence and poor critical thinking skills will shut down creativity. Phase 4 is essential to mitigate anti-creative forces. While learners might struggle individually with new ideas, the collaborative approach accompanied by related exercises leading to the arts-based inquiry lesson reduces ambiguity.

**Determining the Purpose of an Online MBA through Collaborative Arts-based Activities**

In the final course module, student teams engage in a virtual artistic experiential activity to determine their purpose in pursuing an online MBA. At this stage of the course, students are familiar with both arts-based learning and MBA storytelling from Phases 2 and 3, respectively. Building on Phase 4 student experiences and reflections, the instructor provides soft or non-directive instructions to avoid discouraging collective creative practices. Some boundaries guide their attention toward co-creating an artistic artifact or metaphor to showcase their online MBA purpose because some individuals do not consider themselves creative. Moreover, the final project focuses on the process of artistic creation in teams that can orient students towards an alternative perspective on creativeness as a collaborative practice (Mack, 2013) able to be employed in businesses and organizations.

The outcome of the arts-based learning experiential activity is a co-created artifact or metaphor. Once produced, the teams share their co-creations with the entire class through an online blog. Sharing creates additional ways for classmates, as audience members, to use their own sensibilities to enjoy various storied artifacts. In the process, they simultaneously witness peers’ creative approaches to the collective artistic activity and diverse perspectives employed to make sense of the online MBA experience. Afterward, each team submits a final group reflection paper (GRP) on the collective creative process. Finally, the instructor maps the GRP creative process outcomes to the AAC&U Creative Thinking VALUE Rubric (AAC&U, 2009a) for scoring and program assessment. Guidance for using the Creative Thinking VALUE Rubric states, “Creative thinking in higher education can only be expressed productively within a particular domain. The student must have a strong foundation in the strategies and skills of the domain in order to make connections and synthesize” (AAC&U, 2009a, para. 3). The instructor used phases leading up to the final exercise in the online MBA class to ensure skills and concepts exposure. As measured with the rubric, students reach a milestone by creating an entirely new object appropriate to the domain and the capstone when they can reflect on their creative process in the proper context.

The student narratives in Figures 6 and 7 describe their experiences. These accounts have a dual purpose: (a) artifact descriptions and (b) insights on how participants learn through experiencing creative activities (Gherardi & Perrota, 2013).

**Menu:** The online MBA is like a meal delivery service in that it "brings the meal to you." The Online MBA is different from the regular MBA, it is convenient, but we are still fed. Just like food delivery, there are some things lost, maybe the food got cold, or the home venue isn't great for the meal...so it is with the online format, it's not going to feel like...
the in-person [program]. Wherever we decide to be nourished we have dinner companions, our community of practice, and often this is what "makes the meal".

If your dinner companions are invested in the dining experience you're going to learn and be fulfilled and feel much more nourished. We get out what we put into the experience, we can be present and really take the meal in, or we can barely taste it, and allow it to be a completely forgettable experience. The Online MBA is an opportunity to be nourished and prepared for what's next. We need to engage and be present with the materials and the online community.

**Pandemic Pathways:** While we have all taken different paths to get to the point of obtaining our MBA, we can all relate to how COVID-19 has impacted our paths and how the online MBA program allows us to continue our journeys. We all see the path ahead of us, and sometimes, we think we have the map memorized. All we have to do is get there, but things just around the corner change the path. When some of us started the MBA or began the research process, we very likely did not think there would be a global pandemic. For those of us who started this term, we may have known exactly what we were getting into but perhaps, our personal and work experiences have detoured us.

**Digital Quilt:** The idea for our artifact was introduced by our most artistic member. The idea resembled a blank, digital patch-work quilt created with Excel software. The ingenious idea was immediately agreed upon by the group. Reflective and engaged ideas followed. Our main objective was to create an artifact that felt personable by illustrating connections amongst group members.

This is the symbolism behind our ‘digital quilt’. As with a quilt, there is much patchwork and differing origins going into the process but through proper molding and stitching, the result is a thing bringing all those unique identities together into common purpose. It is this we desired to represent our journey in the use of powerful imagery, not words, to tell our story. We are different yet the same. Moreover, the stitching on the quilt emphasizes the connection of our narratives.

**Flexibility Poster:** The poster presentation did a wonderful job of accomplishing this task. Unlike a slide show where each idea is separated on a different slide, all the ideas are together as one cohesive presentation. An online MBA truly extends the opportunity of achieving a higher education degree to students who have full time jobs and careers, and even families. It provides flexibility [for]…career and personal growth. Every member of our group agreed that one of the main benefits of the online MBA program, is that students can successfully complete the classwork in their own time and at a location of their choosing.

**The Online MBA is for Us Video:** We decided to focus on the question “What is the online MBA for?” The online MBA is for “us!” Our group felt the best way to communicate to others was to ensure the artifact reflected our own personal stories with authenticity. Photos…from the roles we play in our daily lives led us to the online MBA. The video consists of an upbeat tune in the background. Audio and visual aspects
stimulate the person watching. Our group was surprised by the outcome and pleased with the way the video turned out. “A picture is worth a thousand words” …we feel our final artifact shares our storied purposes.

Figure 6. Student Statements on the Artifacts

The five cases shared above range from metaphors to objects. For example, describing the MBA as a menu or a pandemic pathway exercises a metaphorical approach. The Digital Quilt, Flexibility Poster, and Us Video provide artifacts with a more object-like quality. The latter three examples also have the common characteristic of capturing connections among the group members. The Digital Quilt group makes explicit that they wanted to illustrate these connections. The Flexibility Poster group wanted all their ideas together in one presentation. The final group used ‘Us’ in their title and approach.

The collective approach toward the creative process was evident in three of the five groups. This outcome is significant because the other important feature of this activity is discovering how creativity happens through experiential arts-based collaborations. The following descriptions offer student perspectives on their creativity experience.

General Remarks:

The assignment directives for the artifact were very unstructured which provided freedom for creativity. Unfortunately, our group members tend to be analytical so this creative freedom created ambiguity which we had difficulty reconciling.

We come from fields where creativity is not a large part of our day-to-day lives. By combining ideas, we were able to consider each team member’s understanding of the assignment.

Our group came up with six different ideas to form an artifact during a brainstorming session. At this early point in the project, we were comfortable with giving any idea, without judgment from other team members or fear of ridicule. Sensemaking started to shift upon reflection on how our peers would receive the artifact, and whether they would be able to make sense of what we were trying to articulate. We had serious concerns about whether we could do this without text or audio. We ultimately decided to create a video slideshow.

What this project has helped us realize is that being open to new ideas can help strengthen the creative process and lead to breakthroughs. Creating our message through imagery and artifacts was a different direction than just writing a paper expressing our ideas, and it allowed us to be more playful…and even brought us a sense of joy.

Taking Risks:
With the course being online, there is a challenge of choosing an artifact that does not speak to other groups like it speaks to ours, but part of the creative process is accepting those risks so that our creativity can be expressed.

Collectively, we would categorize our group as a bit on the conservative side. However, as we moved to the final project our demeanor was much more relaxed. We were comfortable with each other and our respective opinions. We were much more secure in our academic standing. This led us to take more risks.

Our group struggled with thinking creatively, as we are not very creative individuals. We worked through this combining our thoughts to come up with an artifact that reflects all of us. We are in different age groups, walks of life, career paths, and geographical areas. Our differences ended up being what made our project work so well. We all brought different strengths that worked in our favor.

We took a risk with Canva as our technology to co-produce our artifact. We were initially uncertain with how our final artifact would be able to convey our message, but this technological platform allowed us to present our ideas with a poster where we were able to successfully express commonalities.

Whether or not we felt willing, we knew we were taking risks…we had to get ok with that. Whenever someone ventures an irregular/risky/creative concept in a group setting there's always fear that the concept will be perceived as not being good or silly…As social beings we fear the risk of judgment of our words, thoughts, and ideas. "Does my creativity fit someone else's idea of creativity?" "Will my concept feel lame to others?" "Is it not bold enough or will it not work well enough for others?"

As our group has worked more together, we've arrived at a greater level of comfort to be "foolish" with ideas, personal security within a community of practice comes with time, and dialogue, and only arrives when a level of familiarity is achieved and the unknown that each group member brings wears off a little.

We felt the risk more on a personal level, but when the group arrived at our concept, the sense of risk went away with the sense of personal vulnerability, as the group was now moving forward as a team. Still, as a group collectively we sensed the risk that what we all understand the artifact to be and mean, might not translate well to an audience, and while we still feel this risk, we feel like it's safer knowing the five people are validating it than just the individual.

**Creative Problem Solving:**

Some creativity killers that did come into play, were time limitations and working from different time zones. With less time comes more stress, and with more stress comes less creativity.
The online nature of our interactions slows the process of familiarity and therefore works as a creativity killer.

The challenges that we encountered during this process included technological issues. The Google platform was visually easier to adapt to as well as collaborate as everyone in the group was able to review and go through everything together.

Having access to technology is a huge component to a team being successful, especially a team that is spread across the country. A typical PowerPoint format could have been a material barrier and a creativity killer.

After working through potential options, our group was interested in submitting our project in a movie format. We felt challenged since none of the members had experience with movie-making technologies. One of the members had seen her children create movies on Apple iMovie so we originally planned to work with that program; however, the iMovie platform did not work as well as we had hoped. While choosing photos for the project, a group member serendipitously found that Microsoft had a movie maker program in Photos. This turned out to be a user-friendly program that helped create a product we were satisfied with.

We designated one group member to add all of our text and images directly on Canva. This was a completely different platform than we were used to. For our first two projects, we utilized Google Slides which allowed us to communicate our initial ideas by email, then contribute to our slideshow at our own paces. Canva, on the other hand, was only accessible by one team member to make necessary additions or edits on our artifact. Constant communication allowed us to successfully produce the Canva artifact.

We often encountered too many ideas that we wanted to showcase. Many of us felt flooded with choices and wondered which images to choose. Each image we came across portrayed a different meaning. We have overcome these challenges by communicating openly with each and relying upon the unique perspectives of each team member to smooth our many ideas into one cohesive artifact that represented all of us. We were willing to discard an idea if it didn’t work or keep it if it was accepted by the others.

If it took too much explaining, we felt the concept wouldn't pan out, if it didn't make quick and obvious key metaphorical representations to things like the "online" nature, the diverse but shared experience, the storied purpose, we didn't want to force the metaphor, and if didn't quickly resonate…we kept looking. Finally, we felt like we had a metaphor that represented our experience and common story, while also describing the online nature of an MBA. The trick is boiling the complexity of a metaphor down into messages that can be delivered tersely.

**Multiple Perspectives:**
Rather than splitting up and joining at the end we were constantly hearing others’ experience, understanding, and views. Everyone has something new to bring to the table and our group benefited from that diversity.

We approached the reviews of the peer-produced artifacts together. We had felt isolated when we developed our artifact so were interested to see how other groups approached the assignment and incorporated creativity.

We feel that with the final project, many groups chose to take risks and showcase a more creative way of sharing their stories.

Looking at other teams’ artifacts was very eye-opening and showed our group members the creativity of our classmates. It was interesting to see how we were all given the same project and came up with different artifacts and narratives. We see this daily as we work with others, and this project showed the importance of teamwork and how to use our experiences and expertise to come up with the best outcomes.

We found it easy to be curious, interested, and respectful. Creative processes are open-ended [and] open-concept and that brings extra challenge as a person goes through self-critic and group-critic of even the creative framework of the task.

When we have gone through the exercise of this group expression, we have felt the challenge of being tunneled into a concept, venturing new ideas, navigating the question of “What should this artifact/metaphor look like and be presented like, what are people expecting”? Having gone through the challenges, a person becomes very curious and interested in what another group produced by the process of comparison.

We noticed that other groups really excelled at things that we didn’t address well, and that is very noticeable…Similarly, we noticed what we did well through this same process, but this is only able to be fully noticed through the context of the body of other perspectives and examples from our peers.

**Innovative Thinking:**

Creativity was not stifled by group dynamics, but instead allowed to flourish and be shared. Group engagement fostered an environment where everyone was equal in respect, expectations, and accountability.

We were able to exemplify the concept described by March: “the technology of foolishness, an approach that ‘might help… in a small way to develop the unusual combinations of attitudes and behaviors that describe interesting people, interesting organizations, and interesting societies of the world’.” (Clegg, et al. p 376. 2019.)

As a group, we chose to challenge ourselves by using a technological platform that a few of us were unfamiliar with. This innovative approach allowed us to get creative with presenting our thoughts and ideas by way of a poster layout.
Our group thought innovatively in that all of us come from different backgrounds and stories that greatly varied. Although none of us come from creative fields of study, we combined our strengths to create the artifact. We took each other’s differences and turned them into a cohesive project.

In recognition of the pandemic, the second [quilt] iteration included the stitches resembling the sky and the earth to signify that our educational and employment aspirations are affected by COVID but in solidarity with others around the earth. The last iteration of the digital quilt was to add a purple border that signifies... dreams for peace, health, and happiness.

**Connecting, Synthesizing, and Transforming:**

We took our individual ideas and turned it into an artifact of our own individual building blocks coming together to lead to a destination. Although our building blocks are made up of different experiences and stories, together they are getting to their destination. We had to take the idea of a path and turn it into something deeper. The building blocks represent us as individuals but when you put them all together, they lead to a great destination.

Businesses have had to rethink the way that their companies operate and taking classes online and doing team projects has really aligned with that way of thinking. It has allowed us to transform from working side by side to get projects completed, to doing it all virtually as highlighted in this project.

We learned throughout this course how to properly work together under different circumstances and come to conclusions. We think that teamwork for this online MBA class also showed how teamwork is going for many businesses during Covid19, as many teams are not able to physically be together during this time and must all work together virtually.

We feel that our final project allowed us to work together in a more collaborative way requiring more communication with one another, especially since we shared a poster as our final artifact. Our sensemaking shifted as we needed to work together in gathering our ideas and present them in a collective and uniform manner. Through our final project, we grew to learn so much more about one another.

When working with a group, many may run into problems of having alternative perspectives and differing interpretations of the topic at hand. Both alternative perspectives and interpretations are helpful in sensemaking by providing different points of view and opinions within a group, which in turn leads to more creative solutions and results.

Storytelling relies on insight, reflection, and reflexivity to allow a person to convey their own narrative with many others. It is a means of conveyance that reveals to an audience a message imbued with the perspective of the speaker. Storytelling is a powerful
communication tool in the sense that it creates connections between people. Moreover, stories can help managers to engage and effectively communicate with their employees in a professional setting. As we all spoke and corresponded, we found great similarities and shared differences in our journeys that connected the stories shared. The art of storytelling allowed us to share with one another...to consciously reflect on our own narratives with reflexivity and perspective to find comparisons with one another and understand the members of our group.

Figure 7. Student Statements on Learning Through Arts-based Collaboration

Comments on Student Descriptions of Learning

The students commented on risk, creative problem-solving, multiple perspectives, innovative thinking, and connecting, synthesizing, and transforming. The two main risk themes were trusting each other personally and using unknown technology. Creative problem-solving posed challenges because of time limitations causing stress, technological barriers to collaboration, and asynchronous online interactions, which slowed the process of getting to know one another. However, the students transformed the risk and technology barriers into assets. Technology provided the means for collaboration in the tools to produce creative outcomes.

The students came to understand that innovative thinking relies upon multiple perspectives. As opposed to working in silos, it was essential for group members to engage with each other constantly. Groups benefited from the constant sharing of diverse ideas. The instructor gave the same project guidance to all groups, but ultimately, each group produced different artifacts and narratives. Some groups excelled while others did not. This performance difference was not noticeable until groups were able to see the creative outcomes of their peers. It was clear that some groups took more risks and produced more innovative products. Undergoing this peer review experience ensured that the participants saw the value of diversity, engagement, and risk-taking. Creativity flourished in groups who learned to communicate and trust each other. Although one group had no members from creative professional fields, their willingness to engage with their different backgrounds and experiences help them think innovatively.

All groups successfully used their members to generate ideas and produce a group artifact. Each showed that they could work in a virtual world and get the job done. They were able to make sense of their situation, work together, and present a collective output. The students indicated that alternative perspectives and interpretations contributed to more creative solutions. Communication was a crucial factor in the process. The students understood that storytelling creates connections between people and can also help managers communicate better with employees.

Finally, the student narratives show a certain mastery of course concepts and content. Students applied course jargon to describe their experiences. Throughout the narratives, we see words like creativity, sensemaking, creative process, imagery, collective, risk, community, familiarity, personal vulnerability, collectively, creativity killer, collaboration, collaborative, shared experience, storied purpose, reflection, and reflexivity. The students engaged in a creative process producing a product and the capability to talk about that process. They also did it using domain-appropriate criteria as specified by the rubric.
DISCUSSION

This paper described a virtual arts-based experiential learning activity in an online MBA program. A creative activity employing a collaborative process guides students to explore the purpose of their online MBA artfully. Ruth’s (2017) ‘web of stories’ research and Mack’s (2013) study on collaborative artifact-making provide the inspirations to structure the activity. Materials such as clay, blocks, paint, canvasses, and other craft materials yield artifacts in the physical classroom. Online environments require new ways of thinking about how to incorporate collective artifactual course design elements.

Using art in the virtual world has the advantage of being subject to interpretation just as it would be in the physical environment. In contrast, text-based materials may produce unintended interpretations even when authors are careful with the words. Regardless, the objective is to get learners into the zone of experiential learning and beyond that of just concept learning. Providing an applied business education oriented toward career readiness makes good sense and is required by accreditation associations.

Rich experiential activities directed at career readiness will yield a transformative learning outcome when the participants are genuinely engaged. This type of involvement requires high levels of activity and risk as learners are subject to fewer boundaries. The instructor is less able to predict outcomes since those depend upon group collaboration. Thus, a phased-in approach is best for achieving artistic creativity through collaborative processes. This approach is consistent with recommendations for scaffolding creative arts-based learning adventures. But, as Darso (2014) explains, these are not the kinds of things that we can teach. Instead, students need spaces designed for artistic co-creativeness to unfold in unique experiential ways.

The student groups described in this paper produced five unique artifacts. Each group explained their artifact and reviewed those produced by the other groups. First, the reflections suggested that the groups achieved a creative outcome because of a collaborative process. Second, the process succeeded because individuals learned to trust and accept risk. Third, communication influenced each group’s degree of success. Finally, the learners employed the language of the domain to describe their ability to achieve creative collaboration.

Students are not the only ones learning from this outcome. The instructor gains insight to inform the curriculum and associated processes. Ruth (2017) describes how highlighting the storied purposes of MBA education can also aid faculty members and business schools in understanding more about students’ tacit interests. Understanding learner motivations may be particularly helpful for developing online degree programs, curricula, courses, and experiential activities. Simmons (2015) offers a practical step-by-step approach. She consults with businesses and organizations worldwide to develop storytelling skills as a powerful form of communication. Faculty can readily adapt this experiential approach to the classroom. Students typically have access to Simmons’ work through online library e-books, requiring no additional expense. For example, Cleverley-Thompson (2018) builds on Simmons’ (2015) techniques to offer multiple pedagogical strategies for teaching storytelling to students in leadership education.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has emphasized the importance of the arts-based learning movement for inspiring artistic approaches to experiential management education practices. It connects with online experiential learning practice by showing how students experience ‘virtuality’ through artistic interventions. The intent is to encourage others to use creative online activities to achieve greater understanding through engaged learning. Taylor and Ladkin (2009) remind us that it is difficult to predict specific outcomes with arts-based learning. The management educator will not necessarily know what will happen in advance. However, the impact of these types of approaches may reveal themselves in the future, well after any specific course or program ends. From a practical standpoint, management educators would do well to engage in practical reflexivity (Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004) to consider how they might open up notches (Lewis, 2013) for learning and knowing outside traditional education models. Artistic methods often require both students and educators to simply trust the process (Mack, 2013).

Nonetheless, virtual arts-based methods come with distinctive technological challenges. Thus, there is a need to ensure greater familiarity with the tools and applications essential to artful virtual activities. Opportunities exist to discover easily accessible audio-visual platforms that will assist both students and instructors as we collectively navigate through current and future technological transitions (Johnston & Lane, 2019). This direction would provide a fruitful arena for research and practice on experiencing virtuality differently.

REFERENCES


