Coping Cycle and its importance when designing an Assessment: Reflections on the Learning Process

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Abstract

Live student projects in a Higher Education (hereinafter HE) setting are vital in business education as they allow for a practice-based and holistic development of employability skills. This empirical paper illustrates how the assessment design and regime may affect student engagement and learning in live student projects. The approach advocated encompasses the conduct of projects that take advantage of a simple principle in learning, the utilization of the coping cycle as a means for double loop learning. The data used as evidence in this work focus on the project teams' Facebook conversations. The descriptive statistics and the qualitative data provide an empirical basis for the claim that assessment design leads to a particular kind of learning and emotional journey for the students and in this case potentially facilitating double-loop, deeper learning. The findings can inform HE academics and teaching practitioners who are developing educational student-run projects and can provide insights for educational pedagogy.

Key words: Coping Cycle, Higher Education, Liminal Space, Failure, Learning

Introduction

The HE sector is facing numerous challenges and there is pressure for HE institutions to provide evidence of positive impact to the economy (AACSB, 2008; AHRC, 2008). This focus requires learning a different knowledge set that extends beyond the research skills that HE education used to provide towards developing employability skills and graduates who exhibit resilience, independence, and tenacity (Culkin & Mallick, 2011; Yorke, 2006). The Department in question used live business projects and designed them to enable deep, transformational learning that relies on a reiterative process of trial and error. Such a process may lead to occasional moments of stress and failure which however were viewed as be productive in terms of learning (Kapur, 2016) at they would facilitate double-loop deep learning (Argyris, 2002) and we organised support and scaffolding mechanisms to support students to overcome such micro-failures and deliver results both in performance and learning.

Assessment Design

All TMD students had Business Projects where cross-year teams would deliver live projects for real local SMEs. The assessment regime was based on the coping cycle of change shown in Figure 1. The year 2012-3 is taken as an example to demonstrate the approach.

The assumption in adopting the coping cycle as an explanatory framework is that students, when faced with new assessments, go through the stages as shown in Figure 1.
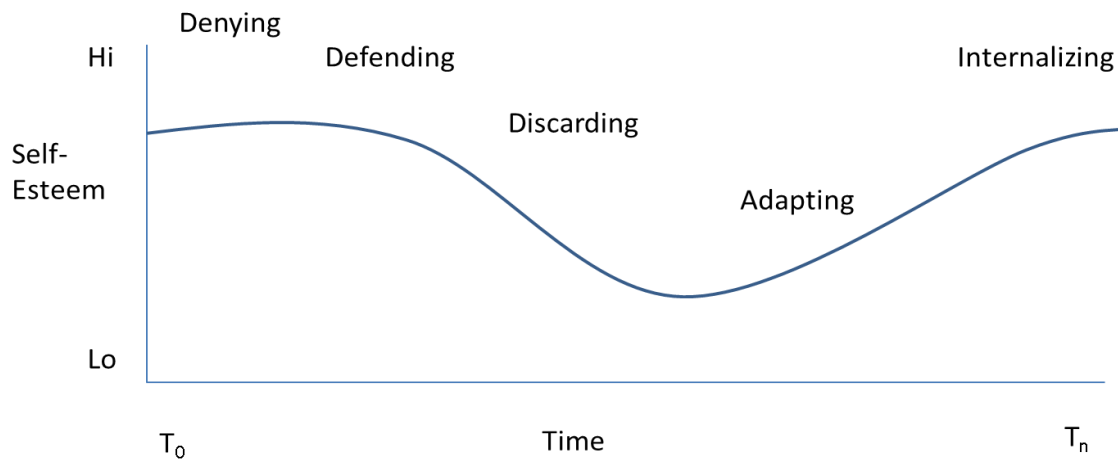

Figure 1 The Coping Cycle (Adapted from: Burnes, 2004)

The assessment regime was designed to facilitate the highs and lows students face with every new assessment. The learning happens in the discarding of the old state of knowledge and the adaptation towards the new ways of thinking. Figure 2 demonstrates the assessment regime and how it translated the coping cycle into an assessment process.
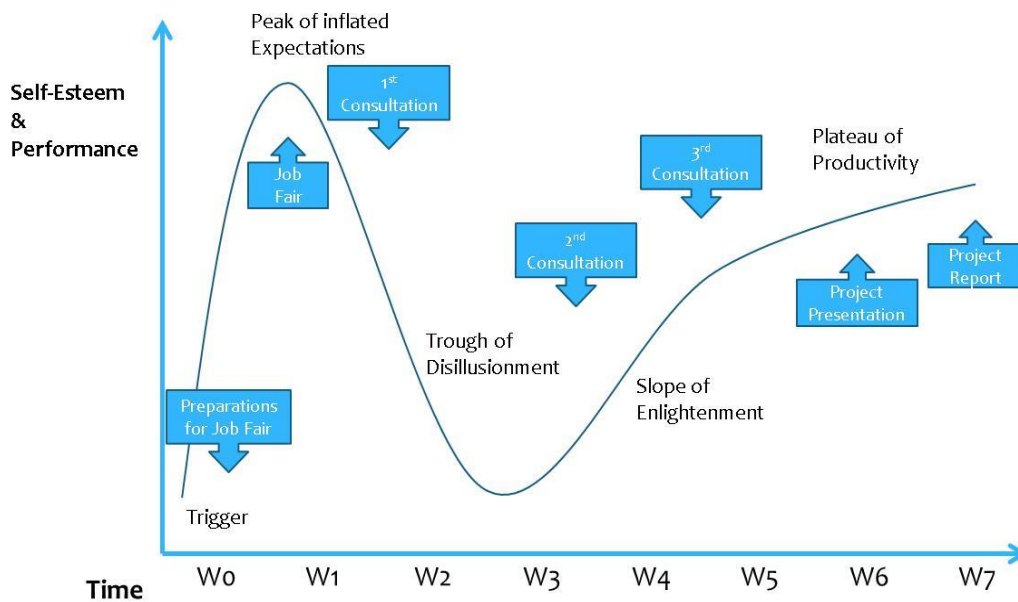

Figure 2: The Assessment Design via a coping cycle lens; descriptions adapted from the Gartner Hype curve

The intial project announcements and the job fair were designed to be the peak of the early stage of the project. All consultants were instructed to provide a critical evaluation of the first efforts of the students in the first consultation in week 2-3. The second consultation was purposefully supportive

enabling the teams to rise from disillusionment. The third consultation aimed to get the team to perform well for the actual summative assessment.

Evaluation

For this work we are only using the social media records. Quantitative descriptive data and qualitative data are extracted from students' conversations on Facebook from start of the project to the finish. In this work, we only wish to indicate that the assessment regime as designed ended up influencing the patterns of interaction and emotional state of the business project teams.

Looking at the frequency of posts across the length of the business projects the communications follow a similar pattern to the coping cycle as the assessment design predicted. The first week starts on a high level of engagement within the teams followed by a drop after the first consultation (which typically happened around week 3) and a higher level of engagement after the second consultation as shown in Figure.

Weeks
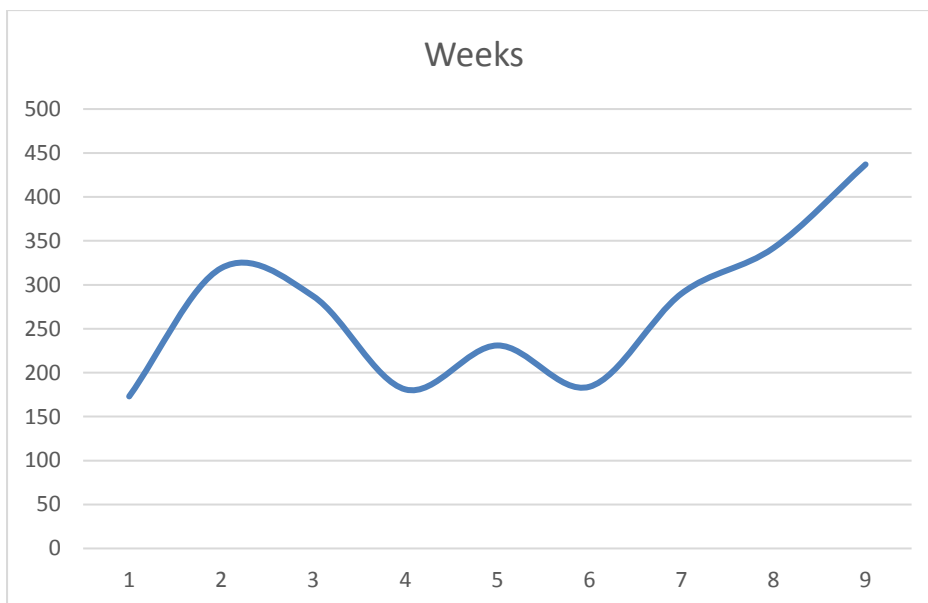
Figure 3: Overall frequency of interactions on Facebook for all teams

This pattern was replicated in varied degrees within each team. Both examples presented here (Figure 4 and Figure 5) follow a similar pattern with high levels of engagement in the early weeks and towards the end with the only difference being that in company 1 we witness more engagement at the start in relation to the end while the reverse is true for Company 2.
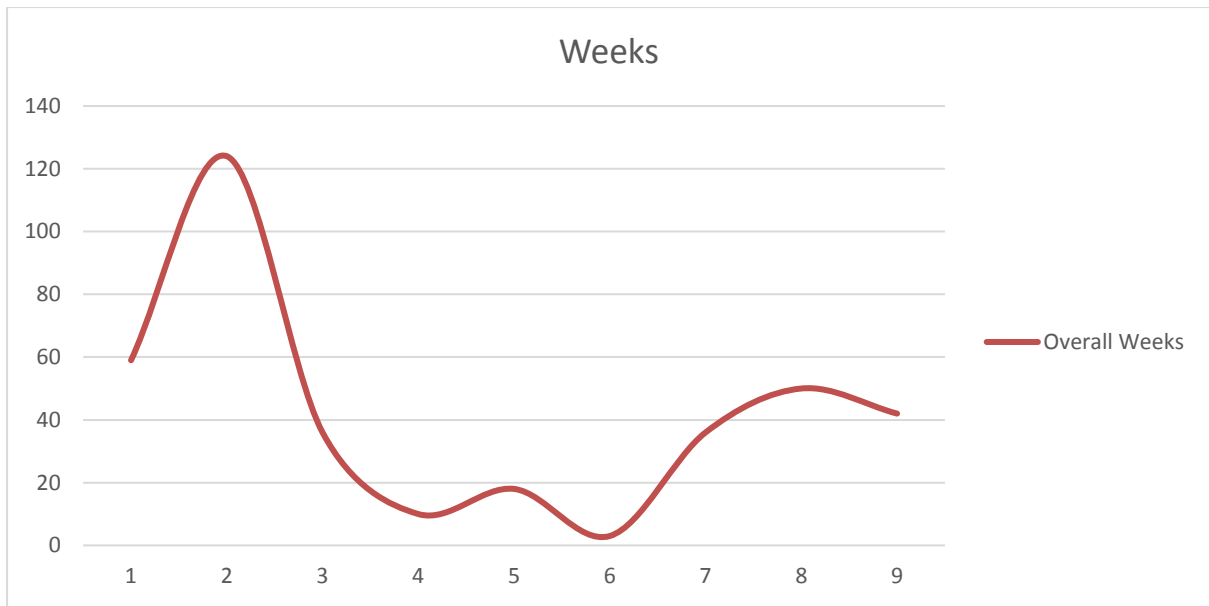
Figure 4: Company 1 team's interactions for the duration of the project
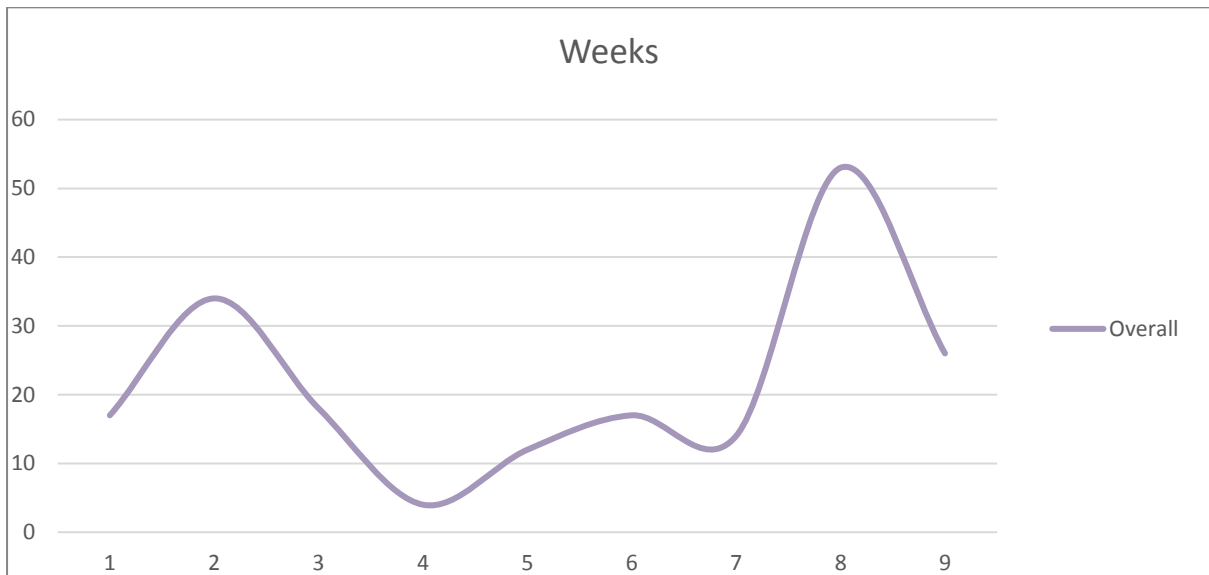

Figure 5: Company 1 team's interactions for the duration of the project

When checking the actual text conversations of the Facebook interactions we witness a similar pattern of emotions starting with jubilant, relatively excited statements and interactions followed by rather more measured interactions in weeks 3-5 and more nerves and an element of anxiety towards the final stretch. The quotes below provide some sense of the affective state of the learning journey:

COMPANY 1

Weeks	Company 1	Weeks	Company 2
1	Res2 "Good stuff im excited for it knowing we have a good team bring it on girls"	**1**	**Res1** "Also, i'd suggest we all do a bit of research on the job describtions of all the companies we pitched for today, since we don't know which one we gona get, so we'll all have an idea of the direction we wanna go when we meet."
2	Res1: "(Res2), I love it! great job...	**2**	**Res2: "**I have attached the Marketing Strategy and Timeframe we created today to this post. Our next meetings will be: Friday 12-1pm in DA005 to prepare for meeting (tutor) Friday 1-2pm meeting with (tutor) in (room) Friday 2-3pm in DA005 to make changes to our marketing strategy/timeframe"
5	Res3: "this is my part done,sorry its late. there is another file im trying to upload its taking forever, i will send that to Res4 email"	**3**	**Res1: "**We all realized how long it took us to design the intro today, which we couldn't even complete. To avoid that in the future, how about us just focusing on what to write (text) and everyone (or at least some of us - those that think are good at it) trying to design it at home, as we might probably have more ideas when we are on our own and playing around it."
7	Res1 "Don't worry as long as it is uploaded on here by Weds all will be well."	5	**Res1:** "Res2 is there any way you can get in touch with (tutor2) or (tutor3), they share the same office so they might be able to tell us what's going on."
8	Res1 "Res5 dont worry about it to much. If you can still meet up with the team at 9:30 for a while that will be great!!! If she asks if anyones missing i will just explain. That due to the change in times you were unable to make it!"	7	**Res2: "**Everyone needs to start taking the project seriously because we only have 2 weeks left to complete everything. Please try and profile your entrepreneur and 20 people by tomorrow and email your results to Res1 as soon as possible so we can start on the analysis"
		8	**Res2:** Be sure to dress smartly (smart-formal, not smart-casual). If you aren't presenting read through the report and presentation to prepare yourself for any questions that might be asked, because (tutor) and the client will be targeting you.
9	Res5 "OWWWW YESSSS!!!!.....we smashed it, hard work pays offf!!! THANKS EVERYONE KEEP IT GOING"	9	**Res1:** Well done to those who met today. Res2 could you please post what we've done so far for a final read through before tomorrow, thanks. 06/05/13

Discussion & Conclusion

The journey of all teams as shown by the two examples was broadly similar and it was clearly affected by the structure of the assessment regime providing tentative evidence that it is not only the assessment design that matters but also the assessment regime and the assessment communication (delivery). With two points of high engagement and stress (the starting point and the final assessment) the emotions clearly run high, positive in the beginning and more stressful and negative towards the end of the project.

What is more interesting is that in the middle point, where according the coping cycle we have low performance and learning indeed the teams experienced low levels of engagement which is in accord with extant literature and overcame a number of micro-failures that became learning points and led to a more vigilant and alert team towards the end of the project. This process of overcoming obstacles and learning through trial and tribulation are indicative of professional growth in the behavior of the students.

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