

# ACTIVE LEARNING FOR ADULTS: REPORTING AN EXPERIENCE IN A MARKETING COURSE

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**Abstract:** Although highly praised, the pedagogical use of active learning methods in Business Administration in Brazil is still modest. Thus, this paper presents and discusses active learning methods and reports the knowledge obtained in the application of a combination of active learning methods. The aim of this study is to broaden the understanding of active learning and thus, to equip teachers and researchers with useful information for their profession. The experience took place between the second half of 2015 and the end of 2016 in the course of Marketing MBA. The analysis was carried out in ten groups of a subject of eight meetings, involving PBL (*problem based learning*) sessions, case discussion session, group project and individual test application. The results were promising in terms of student achievement, the quality of the teacher-student relationship and the subject assessment.

**Keywords:** Active learning; Marketing; Teaching methodologies.

## 1 Introduction

The academic background of the marketing professor in the postgraduate course prioritizes the formation of a researcher, valuing the technical knowledge to the detriment of the teacher academic background (Veludo-de-Oliveira, Quintão, & Urdan, 2014). Researchers in education reinforce the need to change the unilateral responsibility on the part of teachers in "teaching" and the passivity on the part of students in "attending classes" by the joint commitment of "producing classes", with greater participation of students and the change of the teacher's role (Anastasiou & Alves, 2009; Cunha, 1993; Dewey, 2009; Freire, 1996; Kinchin, Lygo-Baker, & Hay, 2008; Seaton & Theile, 2006).

This article aims to increase the understanding of active learning and, thus, equip teachers and researchers with information useful to their profession. To do so, it discusses different methods, strategies and active dynamics of teaching-learning and reports a lived experience in the subject Competitive Intelligence (CI), offered in a 480-hour *lato sensu* (MBA) postgraduate course between June 2015 and December 2016. The analysis began with the composition of ten groups, with eight sessions each.

## 2 A new way of teaching and learning

To contextualize and understand the theme under study, the theoretical framework addresses the adult student and the importance of active learning, problem-based learning and case study learning, and concludes by discussing the learning styles and the teacher's role.

## 2.1 The adult learner and active learning methods

For Knowles (1973), the teacher's role in adult education would become that of a facilitator, who produces the conditions that promote learning. Establishing an environment for learning, the diagnosing of the needs, the programs and the content formulating to meet the learning needs, the planning and conducting the process, and the learning assessment are some of the facilitator's responsibilities in the adult learning process (Carvalho et al., 2010; Knowles, 1973; Vogt & Alves, 2005).

Anastasiou and Alves (2009) point out that, while the traditional method of education emphasizes the memorization by repetition, the process of "*teaching*" (*ensinagem*), a term coined by the authors to refer to the collaborative process of teaching and learning, enables more complex thought operations, such as a comparison, synthesis, observation, classification, interpretation, criticism, search for assumptions, imagination, obtaining and organizing data, hypothesis gathering, application of facts and principles to new situations, decision and planning of project and research.

Learning-focused education has received attention since the early twenty-first century, with the application of different strategies, techniques and teaching dynamics (Anastasiou & Alves, 2009; Kolb et al., 2014). The focus on learning thus assumes a greater concern with the desired objective to be achieved: the transformation of the student. Thus, the learning goal setting should be the starting point for defining the teaching strategy to be adopted. According to Anastasiou and Alves (2009, p.76), "strategies aim at the achievement of objectives, therefore, it is necessary to be clear about where one intends to reach at that moment with the teaching process". Considering that teachers together with students become responsible for "producing the class" requires a review of the lesson strategy.

In 2014, Alice Kolb and other researchers reviewed the previous model and proposed nine learning styles derived from the combination of the initial learning forms: initiating, experiencing, imagining, reflecting, analyzing, thinking, deciding, acting and balancing (Kolb et al., 2014). Considering the process centered on the student and on the learning, once the learning objective to be achieved has been defined and the learning style to be worked out has already been identified, the teacher should define his/her way of acting (*modus operandi*). The

role of the teacher would be, for achieving the objective, to flexibilize his/her main style, varying it: coach, facilitator, specialist and evaluator (Kolb et al., 2014).

## 2.2 Problem-based learning (PBL) and Project Oriented Problem Based Learning (POPBL)

The first uses of PBL methodology occurred in the 1960s at the McMaster Medical School in Canada. In the 1970s, schools in Europe and America began to apply this methodology, such as in Maastricht in the Netherlands, Roskilde and Aalborg in Denmark, and Harvard in the United States (Furquim, Pluskwik, & Wiggins, 2015; Kolmos, 2015).

The PBL is a circular, student-centered approach, which uses problems to start, focus and motivate the learning of socially and professionally relevant knowledge, proposing the integration between theory and practice, applying the knowledge learned in developing a workable solution to a defined problem (Escrivão Filho & Ribeiro, 2008; Frezatti & Martins, 2015). According to Berthelsen et al. (1977 as quoted by Graaf & Kolmos, 2009), the principles that guide the PBL are: orientation to the problem, organization by project, interdisciplinarity, participant control, and connection with reality (*exemplary function*). It is important that the problem which must be treated is "linked to the real problem, be complex, poorly structured, interdisciplinary and allow the investigation" (Silva & Araújo, 2016).

For Ribeiro (2005, p. 40), different application formats and methods are called PBL, since the simplest forms - such as cases based on lectures, lectures based on cases, case studies, modified case studies - up to more complete forms such as learning based on the problems themselves and learning based on reiterative problems. The model of the University of Maastrich, in the Netherlands, resembles the model called by Ribeiro of learning based on the problem itself, in which students make contact with the problem without prior reading about it and devote themselves, in a meeting or in a few weeks, to the understanding of the problem and to the elaboration of the solution (Furquim, Pluskwik, & Wiggins, 2015; Ribeiro, 2005). Learning based on reiterative problems resembles the project oriented problem-based learning (POPBL) presented by the University of Aalborg, Denmark (Furquim, Pluskwik, & Wiggins, 2015; Graaf & Kolmos, 2009). According to Graaf and Kolmos (2009), a problem could evolve into a project to be worked on in several classes and, in some schools, there is differentiation of this practice in PBL (*problem based learning*) and POPBL (*project oriented problem-based learning*). Besides the contact with the specific content, the student's valorization as protagonist of his learning process would bring as benefits: (i) development of holistic vision; (ii) development of the critical thinking and the competence in problem-solving; (iii) improving peer communication and exposure of ideas (*brainstorming*); (iv) improvement

of social skills through teamwork and (v) increased satisfaction with the learning process (Frezatti & Martins, 2015; Furquim, Pluskwik, & Wiggins, 2015; Graaf & Kolmos, 2009; Kolmos, 2015; Silva & Araújo, 2016).

### 2.3 The use of cases as a didactic tool

Cases are real-life business problems that confronted managers at a given time and are offered later to students with open solution problems (Greenhalgh, 2007). The case method is "the thoroughly and objective analysis of a real situation that needs to be investigated and is challenging for those involved" (Anastasiou & Alves, 2009, p. 98), in which participants have room to demonstrate their expertise, experience, observations and analyzes (Corey, 1980; Hammond, 2002). Such situations represent the opportunity for students to confront real problems in a controlled environment, safe for making mistakes and for learning (Corey, 1980; Greenhalgh, 2007). The literature cites as benefits of the method application the increase of the vision on the part of the students, with the increase of their critical vision; increase of the students' motivation, with the increase of their participation in the discussions; development of managerial skills; development of interpersonal skills through group activities; and development of problem-solving skills (Anastasiou & Alves, 2009; Hammond, 2002; Ikeda, Veludo-de-Oliveira, & Campomar, 2005). Success in conducting a case discussion would depend on the teacher's ability to stimulate discovery by probing, put concepts into practice, work the comparison and contrast, and engage students in the discussion (Corey, 1980).

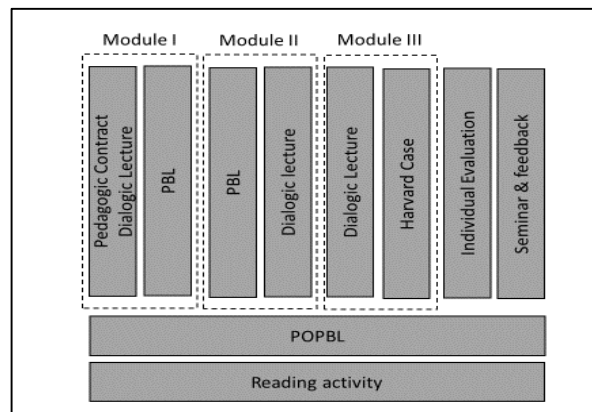
Like any process of change, it is expected resistance to the adoption of active methods, strategies and dynamics by teachers, students and the institution. It is also assumed that the teacher performance will be negatively affected by change at first, but with the accumulation of experiences it will exceed the level of performance prior to the new practice (Bridges, 1986; Kotter, 1997, 2012).

### **3 The report of experience in Competitive Intelligence**

The subject Competitive Intelligence (CI) consisted of eight weekly face-to-face meetings, one of which dedicated to individual assessment. Considering the learning objectives, students were expected to be able to understand and relate the main concepts, to criticize the results coherence of the analysis carried out and to design a strategic map that translated the strategic definitions into tactical activities.

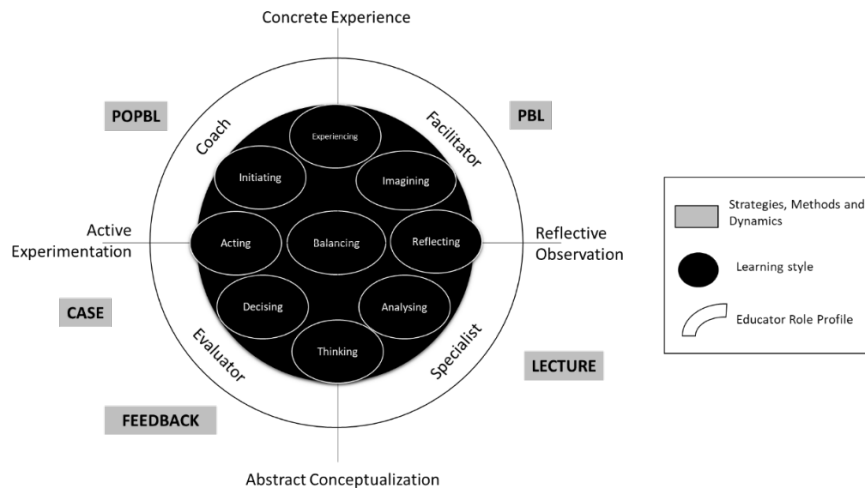
The subject was designed in a way that met the initial goal through active learning, using different teaching and learning methods (Figure 1). In the first module, composed of two

classes, the main concepts of competitive intelligence, use of information for decision making and coherence in the analysis, strategy, tools for strategy formulation, analysis integration and decision coherence were presented and discussed, through dialogued expositive classes and PBL. The second module developed the concepts of marketing information system and decision making at the functional level, using PBL and dialogued expositive classes. In the third module, the concepts of *Business Intelligence* (BI) and *Balanced Scorecard* (BSC), with dialogued expositive classes and application of a case from the Harvard database. At the seventh meeting an individual test without consultation was applied. In the eighth meeting, the optional seminars were presented, and the group and individual assessments were discussed. Throughout all the meetings, the students dedicated themselves to reading the bibliographical references and, in groups of up to six participants, to a project (POPBL) presented at the first meeting.



**Figure 1. Structure of the subject Competitive Intelligence**

The objectives per class and the adoption of different methods required different approaches from the teacher throughout the eighth meetings (Figure 2). In classes one, four and five, it predominated the dialogued exposures with short exercises intercalation. In these sessions, the teacher's attitude alternated between Specialist and Facilitator. The eighth session began with the presentation of seminars. After the papers presentation, the topics discussed were integrated and the teacher encouraged a discussion about factors that could facilitate or hinder the new knowledge application in the students' routine in their executive roles. Continuing, the correction of the test and works was debated. In the end, the teacher made himself available for individual *feedback*. In this class, the teacher dominant approach was that of Facilitator and *Coach*.



**Figure 2. Learning styles, teacher role and active methods**  
 Source: Adapted from Kolb et al. (2014)

### 3.1 Considerations about the PBL and POPBL experience

In the IC subject, the PBL method was applied as a "one day, one problem" in the classroom and as a project (POPBL) in extra class groups. The PBL method, "one day, one problem", was applied in two of the eight meetings, in independent exercises, coming near to the Maastrich University application: a problem placed before the theory is presented to students in small groups, who begin to explore it and to raise hypotheses, effectively facilitated by a tutor who activates its previous knowledge (Furquim, Pluskwik, & Wiggins, 2015; Ribeiro, 2005).

At the beginning of the classroom, the PBL was presented as a teaching and learning method aligned with active learning, and aroused students' interest and curiosity in doing something different. The groups formed ranged from four to six participants, according to the size of the classes, and the exercise was applied in rooms with two to six groups. Initially, for about ten minutes, they read the exercise in plenary and reflected individually on the pre-established questions. Then, they organized themselves to carry out the group work, discussing for another twenty minutes. At the end of the group activity, they held a plenary discussion. During the session, the teacher assumed the role of facilitator, mediating the discussion: he/she encouraged participation, organized the ideas presented by the students on the board and appreciated the contributions of the class when they were rescued at the close of the discussion. The described process involved half of a three-hour meeting. After the break, the teacher made use of resources typical of an expository dialogued class to deepen the concepts worked, appropriating the collaborations derived from the group work and the discussion in plenary.

The room armchairs were initially organized in "U" for the discussions. When the groups were formed, the armchairs were rearranged by the students themselves.

The project (POPBL) that permeates the entire subject had the objective of integrating, deepening and systematizing the knowledge obtained in the classroom. The groups were consisted of four to six members and separated by the students' convenience. The project had a central theme (the opening of a new business), with partial deliveries at the end of each module. For these deliveries, the groups made use of the recommended basic bibliography and deepened their own researches. Each stage of the project started with conceptual issues and finished with the knowledge application in the project. Partial deliveries were performed in classes three and five. In classes four and six, the groups received personalized feedback in writing, and verbally when necessary or requested, with the teacher assuming the role of *coach*. The *feedback* was done through questions that stimulated the deepening of research and the reflection about it. In the final delivery, the groups had the opportunity to redo all the work in the light of the *feedback* provided. In the eighth class, the students received the final *feedback* of the case, with the teacher's assessment and considerations.

### 3.2 Considerations on the Case Method application

The case of the Harvard database was distributed printed and handed out to the students, in the first meeting, during the establishment of the pedagogical contract. At that time, the youtube link to the video "*Inside the Case Method*" from Harvard was made available to students to guide them to prepare themselves for case discussions.

Whenever possible, the case discussion was conducted in a Harvard model room, with benches distributed at different levels, rotating chairs, plenty of moving whiteboards, more than a projection screen and identification of students' names in trihedrons. The students were distributed in alphabetical order in the room, so that they were taken out of the comfort zone, that is, to always work with the groups already established.

The first ten minutes of the class were devoted to the opening and organization of individual notes. In the next fifteen minutes the students checked their understanding by discussing in group with their closest colleagues. The next hour the discussion took place in plenary, in which the teacher's role was alternated mainly between evaluator and *coach*. Students were warned that the case was a simulation game and that roles would be experienced throughout the exercise, and the exercise tone was that of a meeting of the steering committee of the company under study. The positive reinforcement to the best observations was made through affirmative statements about the quality of the comment, request for clapping and even

distribution of chocolates. It was also clearly stated dissatisfaction with superficial or disconnected opinions about the case. At the end of the exercise, considerations were made about the difficulties and doubts presented, as well as about the application of the knowledge discussed in the previous class and reinforced by the reading of the base book. After the break, the class returned as a dialogued exposure, connecting the exposure with the experience of the exercise, other possible solutions and the reality in the students' companies.

### 3.3 Results achieved with the experience

The qualitatively positive result encouraged the sharing of experience through this report.

Even considering that the adoption of active teaching and learning strategies requires changes in the teachers' and students' performance and this requires the students' qualified participation, the experience allows to draw attention to some aspects considered positive:

- The good performance of students in the subject;
- The positive assessment that the students registered in relation to the subject and the work carried out by the teacher, even with more rigorous assessments;
- Approval declared by the students and the quality increase of the teacher-student relationship.

For the results' analysis and presentation, it was considered three classes before the application of the structured method as presented in the article, a class of the beginning of the application, but with many learning and adjustments, and ten classes with application of the presented method.

#### 3.3.1 The teacher and the course assessment

The student's assessment on the subject and on the teacher was carried out by the school's standard research tool - a questionnaire with closed questions, using a 4-point scale (1 being "totally disagree" and 4 "totally agree"), applied on the last day of each subject. Figure 3 shows the cumulative frequency of assessments between points 3 and 4, per class. The objective of the institution is to have at least 80% of the assessments between scales 3 and 4. In the approval indexes average, the subject met the school objectives (80%) in all classes, regardless of the active methodologies adoption. However, the positive evolution of the results reinforces the teacher's perception of the existence of a learning curve with the adoption of the active teaching strategy. The indicators "content explanation" and "activities feedback" would deserve a special attention, once they are slightly below the institution's goal (black *box*) in the first classes who were exposed to active learning.



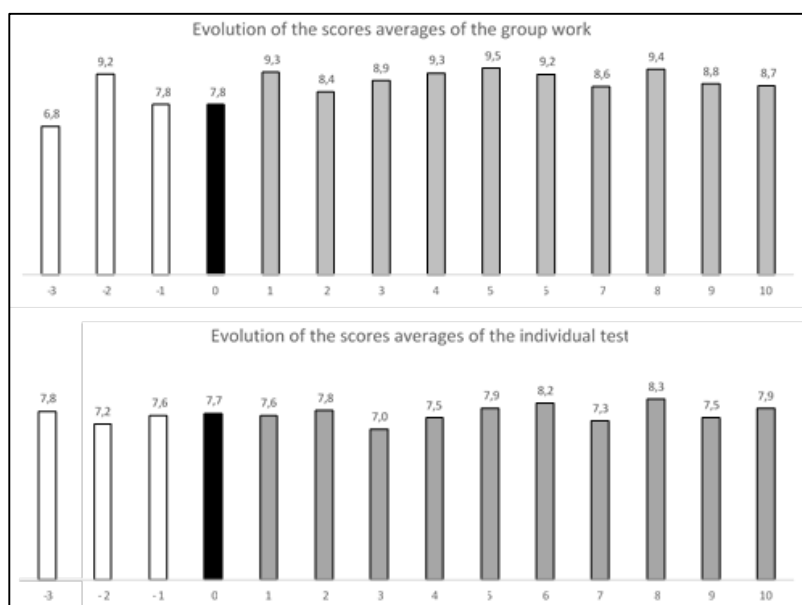
GROUPS	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>TEACHER</b>												
Sum of the frequency of grades 3 and 44												
Planning classes and activities	100	84	100	100	95	100	100	100	96	100	100	100
Making materials available	100	90	100	100	100	96	100	96	100	100	100	100
Explanation of contents	100	74	100	94	79	100	100	93	96	100	100	100
Other teaching strategies	100	84	90	100	95	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Mobilization of students' experience	100	89	80	94	90	100	100	96	96	100	100	100
Explanation of assessment	100	89	90	100	89	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Feedback of activities	100	90	100	100	73	100	100	96	100	100	100	93
Good Teacher	100	84	100	100	90	100	100	96	96	100	100	100
<b>SUBJECT</b>												
	100	90	100	94	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>CLASS</b>												
	100	85	80	94	95	96	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>STUDENT</b>												
	100	90	90	88	95	92	94	93	96	100	100	96

below 80%     
 between 80% and 90%     
 above 90%

**Figure 3. Assessments of the teacher, the subject and the class from the students' perspective**

### 3.3.2 The performance of students

The learning evolution was verified by the scores evolution assessment of individual tests and group work. Figure 4 illustrates the maintenance of good scores in tests and work assignments, even with the rigor increase in the assessments as the teacher's dedication to the increased.



**Figure 4. Evolution of the students' scores averages in formal assessments**

### 3.3.3 The declared approval

According to the report of the group interview, the adopted teaching-learning strategy was approved by the students mainly for balancing moments of exposure, reflection and application of the concepts discussed in an orderly and communicative way. The use of active methodologies also stimulated the connection between Competitive Intelligence, the other subjects of the course and the real challenges of professional life. The PBL problematization, the need for the project evolution and the indication of complementary references in the virtual

library encouraged the reading of the compulsory and complementary references. The *feedback* to the individual and group activities was recognized as being of great importance for the learning process, when confirming or making possible the adjustment of the understanding and the meaning of the concepts. *Feedback* is also perceived as a teacher's concern for the class, reinforcing the meaning, mobilization, and motivation of the students (Ackerman, Dommeyer, & Gross, 2017). The students also highlighted as fundamental: the activities presentation, their relationship with the learning objectives and the closure done by the teacher for the systematization and meaning of the learning.

#### **4 Learning and Final Considerations**

This report of experience was prepared aiming at broadening the understanding of active learning and, thus, equip teachers and researchers with information useful for their profession.

##### **4.1 The development of maturity and the increase of students' participation**

Although several reflections can be made on the adoption of an active teaching-learning strategy, it is worth mentioning the well noticed growth in maturity of the students since the increase of the stimulus up to the reflection and exposure of the ideas, which made possible a greater exchange between teachers and students and enabled the knowledge construction from the students' previous experiences.

As advocated by Paulo Freire's pedagogy of autonomy and by the principles of andragogy of Knowles, from the epistemological point of view new abstractions began to make sense from the initial concrete knowledge, thus creating a new and more elaborated abstract knowledge. The contact with the initial knowledge was only possible by valuing the students' experience through the transferring of part of the responsibility in the "to produce classes", which resulted in their greater participation in the classes. Apparently, after a little initial discomfort, most students agreed to assume the position of responsible for their own learning. The relationship with the teacher improved every class because the students saw him/her as a facilitator of the process for which they were then responsible.

##### **4.2 The change in the role of the student and the need for updating and development**

From the teacher's perspective, the growing interest of institutions by active methodologies indicates the need for constant updating, not only referring to specific scientific knowledge, but also referring to didactic knowledge. As an autonomous researcher, the teacher interested in the adoption of active methods, strategies and dynamics is capable of seeking additional knowledge, and the experiences reports greatly contribute to this self-

development. From the perspective of the institution, change can be stimulated with initiatives aiming at the faculty qualification and awareness of the importance of adopting the active methodologies. The greater amount of time spent by the teacher is an issue that needs to be considered by the institutions. The teacher has turned into one of the references for choosing books, reinforcing his/her role as a content curator, but this has not excluded the student's role in choosing the material to be used.

#### 4.3 The need for coherence in the assessment process

Assessment based on group work and individual test follows the institution's pattern, recognizes individual dedication and encourages the development of interpersonal skills. However, it still prioritizes the assessment by product, which is not coherent with the proposal of a class developed jointly by teachers and students: the "to produce classes" together presupposes the joint work between teacher and students, and the assessment by process is more coherent with the sharing of responsibility in classes.

The discussion on the assessment puts a focus on the restrictions to a greater adoption of innovation: the need for some standardization among teachers of the same subject and longer time for teachers in the preparation of assessments, correction and feedback. Innovation in education depends on the working together of teachers, coordinators and principals.

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