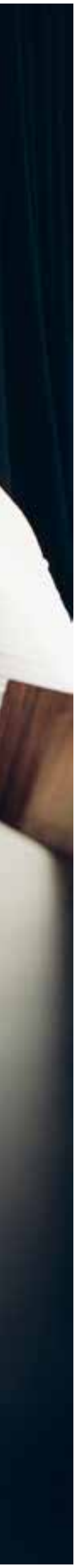
How to develop collaborative projects that drive innovation

Boston University's Questrom School of Business is creating an innovative approach to identifying co-operative ways to improve business education

By **Paul Carlile, Steven Davidson and Howard Thomas**



The Business Education Jam Global Symposium was held at Boston University's Questrom School of Business in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, in November 2019. This unique collaboration brought together 31 Deans, faculty, administrators, and organisational representatives from over a dozen countries and 25 organisations. Most participants had engaged in one of the nine regional Business Education Jams held across the world between 2017 and 2019, and each brought a unique interest in driving forward management education in innovative ways.

The regional Jams had emerged from discussions following the original Global Business Education Jam, which was centred "virtually" at Boston University in 2015, powered by IBM Jam technology, and sponsored by leading organizations including EFMD, GMAC, AACSB, the *Financial Times*, Merck, Johnson & Johnson and Santander Bank. The purpose of the follow on regional Jams, which were held in partnership with schools across the world, were to identify the local challenges and opportunities to improve business education that were not easily identified in the initial Global Business Education Jam.

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The idea behind the subsequent global symposium was not to have another meeting or conference but to physically bring together deans, administrators and association executives in a way that prompted innovative brainstorming and fostered meaningful, collaborative projects. The group assembled in Boston was a very diverse and highly motivated set of individuals invited for the PURPOSE of developing (hacking) collaborative projects during the day-and-a-half event.

The other PURPOSE was to introduce a shared methodology of developing (hacking) collaborative projects that could then be taken back and used in each individual's location and context, to further advance their projects. This methodology was developed at Questrom over the course of the past 3 years as we took insights from the initial Global Business Jam and turned them into sustainable collaborative projects, including the creation of two new degree programmes both featured as exemplars of innovation. The integrated, project-based MS in Management Students programme was spotlighted by Poets & Quants as a "breakthrough" master's programme and named on its list of "The Most Innovative Business School Ideas of 2015". The second is the online MBA, launching in Fall 2020 in partnership with edX, and built from the ground up with an integrated, purposeful curriculum that can scale led to Questrom being named by Poets & Quants as one of the "10 Business Schools to Watch" in 2020. So, the PURPOSE of the Global Symposium was to develop the CONTENT of the potential projects and, more importantly, introduce the PROCESS of how those projects could be created and sustained.

What we outline below are the PROCESS details of the methodology we used to lead this truly unique and collaborative event. This methodology is an amalgam of various design thinking approaches as well as other open innovation influences such as hackathons. The method was structured for a short-duration event (essentially 10 hours of working together within and across groups).

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Introductions and developing topics (depending on the size of the group this can take about two hours. You can start with a dinner so they can get to know each other before this session begins)

The event began in the evening after an informal dinner. After that initial socialisation, we had each individual briefly share the challenges in business education that they faced, with a particular emphasis on unique characteristics of these challenges based on their region. This sharing framed the following prompt: What question would you like answered while you are here?

This provided an opportunity for group members to introduce themselves and their role and the problems and challenges that were motivating them in a very natural fashion. It also allowed them to hear each other's challenges and what they valued and they began to see common themes despite differences in region and role.

At this early stage it is critical to develop a variety of possible topics and challenges, but also to develop a common language for those involved to jointly understand that variety.

All of these challenges are recorded by the facilitator on a large board and are then collaboratively arranged under categories of similarity through the engagement of the larger group. This can form between 12 to 15 categories that will be used as a starting point for the working session that begins the morning of the following day.

The collaborative project methodology

The next morning a summary of the 12 to 15 categories, grouped according to four or five key themes by the facilitators, are handed out to all the participants. Time is then allowed for groups to begin to self-organise around themes and define a topic that was most consequential to them.

Once groups were formed around topics, the facilitator explained the project methodology (see Figure 1) that each group will complete in their breakout rooms. The method has three steps:

1) **WHAT** problem will your group address?
2) **WHO** needs to be involved to address this problem?
3) **HOW** will the project work to address this problem?

Figure 1 Developing (hacking) collaborative projects

Step #1 (90 minutes)	Step #2 (90 minutes)	Step #3 (90 minutes
WHAT ***What problem or unmet need do you want to address as a group?*** • What consequences does it have on education in the region? • How was the problem reframed by the group?	**WHO** ***Who needs to be involved to address this problem?*** • Who are the potential stakeholders and why would they participate? • Who are unusual suspects that have addressed problems like this in other industries?	**HOW** ***How will the project work to address this problem?*** • What does success look like? • What activities and resources are needed? • Who else needs to participate? • Why are you addressing this problem?
Present/Feedback	**Present/Feedback**	**Present/Discussion**

By reframing we mean that as the group talks about how the problem manifests itself from each of their experiences they develop new insights, expand the potential problem space that they want to address and hence identify underlying assumptions about the source of the problem and reframe the problem accordingly

Each step takes approximately 90 minutes. This consists of 60 minutes for each group to complete each step of the method, followed by a short two-minute presentation on a large post-it note by each group to the full group. Individuals from the other groups then provide written feedback and some oral feedback. Written feedback is captured on medium-sized post-its and gathered together for the presenting team.

Explaining each of the steps in the process

STEP #1: Reframing:

The process of identifying topics and then self-organising into groups working around a particular topic initiates Step #1 (approximately 90 minutes).

But once the group begins to work together it is important for members to come to a common agreement about the topic they want to address. We often use the language of "framing and then reframing" the problem to describe this iterative process of improvement.

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From a pure design-thinking point of view each group develops a "How might we …" statement framing WHAT the problem they will focus on.

Presentation/feedback to Step 1 (5 minutes per team for presentation (2 minutes) and feedback (3 minutes))

Each group takes two minutes to state their problem and also reveal to the other groups key points where they developed new insights as they reframed the problem. The other groups wrote down their feedback on medium-sized post-it notes that were gathered up by the facilitator and given to the presenting group. This is done to maximize feedback since all participants can make comments in the allotted five minutes of presentation and feedback.

The facilitator also invited verbal comments from the audience about strengths or limitations of the problem statement and also offered suggestions on how to improve the problem statement.

STEP #2: Unusual Suspects (approximately 90 minutes).

Step 2 asks the question of WHO needs to be involved to address this problem.

During the problem framing and reframing process in Step 1, the groups began to identify key people or stakeholders who would need to be involved to address the problem and develop a solution.

It is important to examine a variety of stakeholders and clarify their involvement and interest in the project. So it is important to think about which stakeholders should be engaged first and how their participation could lead to developments that can then attract other important skills and resources to the project.

When thinking about stakeholders who might drive innovation and change it is also important to think about what we call "unusual suspects" as important potential participants.

Unusual suspects are people who have addressed a problem similar to the one your group is focusing on, but who have done so in a very different context or industry. For this reason, unusual suspects have a unique position in helping the stakeholder be more willing to change and innovate. During our symposium, these "unusual suspects" included musicians, celebrities, community organisers, and religious leaders. While the audience often reacts with shock or humour to the suggested names, working through them it becomes clear that each does offer unique and powerful ways to frame problems or advance solutions. Innovative projects are always associated with a lot of uncertainty, so bringing in an outsider who has done something similar "de-risks" parts of the innovation pathway and decreases resistance.

Presentation/feedback for Step 2

Each group takes two minutes to restate their problem and outline the stakeholders who would need to be engaged to address the problem and specify what each of those stakeholders value and why they would agree to participate. Groups should also identify one or two unusual suspects that could be engaged as learning participants in addressing their problem.

The other groups are given time to write down feedback on medium-sized post-it notes gathered up by the facilitator and given to the presenting group. Again, this is done to maximise feedback since all participants can make comments in the allotted five minutes of presentation and feedback. The facilitator invited verbal comments from the audience about key stakeholders and the choices of a given unusual suspect.

STEP #3: Starting with the end in mind (approximately 90 minutes).

With the problem reframed and the value that key stakeholders and unusual suspects bring to the project established there is now enough details of the WHAT and WHO to develop HOW this collaborative project will be structured. However, this very concrete step is the hardest and so we invoke another key design approach – "starting with the end in mind" – approach to make this process easier (see Figure 1 p40 for a summary of STEP #3).

This backwards design approach helps reduce the sprawling complexity of hacking a collaborative project. This requires the group to describe what a successful outcome would look like for the problem you are trying to address. The group may even think about how that success could be measured, whether qualitatively or quantitatively, to be able to concretely specify the HOW that could lead to success.

With that done you then need to outline the sequence of activities and the knowledge, financial and other resources needed to get to that desired outcome. Identifying sequences of activities and resources not only places key stakeholders in a particular order, but might also identify additional people WHO need to be engaged to drive the sequence of activities that get at the desired outcome.

The last stage of Step#3 is to reflect on WHY your group is addressing this problem. Even though we tapped into each individual's motivations at the beginning of the symposium (what questions do they want answered) it is more important to get at a collective WHY of the group at the end of the symposium.

Now that each group has hacked their projects (the WHAT, WHO and HOW) they have a more concrete understanding of the WHY – their PURPOSE in changing business education in their part of the world and that needs to be clearly stated at the end of this stage.

Final presentation of Step #3

Figure 2 outlines a sequence of storyboarding the backwards design of the HOW of hacking a collaborative project. Each group outlined this on one or two large post-it notes and presented it to the other groups for the last interactive discussion. This discussion was not focused on the same kind of feedback as were the previous presentations but collectively identifying key insights about the essential CONTENT of the WHAT, WHO and HOW outlined in each project.

This includes more general insights from across all the projects concerning the PROCESS of developing the WHAT, WHO and HOW of a collaborative project that can be used to drive innovation in business education in any region of the world.

Outlining one of the projects at the event

Figure 2, on page 43, is a summary of the "storyboarding" project with a focus on undergraduate business education.

Figure 2 Storyboard format for presenting Step #3 (starting with the end in mind …) focused on the topics of improving undergraduate business programmes

What does a successful outcome look like? • Achieving the highest reputation and status both from academia and the wider audiences (media rankings) • A programme that balances hard and soft skills to improve management and managerial judgement • A programme educational philosophy that embraces humanities and the social sciences and develops both analytical/technological acumen and skills of critical thinking and ethical moral judgement	**What activities, resources and experiences are needed?** • Surveys/focus groups addressing needs of key stakeholders • Understanding "unusual suspects" eg how do sports coaches teach teams • Exploring the attitudes and beliefs of different audiences • Millenials • Religious organisations • Examining methods of interactive participative learning • Studying approaches of experiential project-based learning
Who needs to participate and in what order? • Teaching and research faculty in business education • Students • Parents • Policy makers in government and society • Companies, voluntary organisations, mutual organisations, co-operative organisations, professional organisations (eg law) • Unusual suspects: • Social media companies • Entertainment companies • Gamers • Sports coaches • Experiential learning (e.g. Lego serious play)	**Why are you addressing this problem?** • A business undergraduate degree is the largest and increasingly most popular programme globally • Changing lifestyles and environmental influences must impact the content of business education • Business schools have focused much greater attention on MBAs than other programmes. • The undergraduate (UG) programme should have much more significant impact on global management education

Conclusion

Reimagining business education is about large-scale change in schools and how the business education industry operates. Given this, the primary purpose of the Global Symposium starts with the recognition that this amount of change can only be catalysed through collaborative projects and ultimately realised by developing a network of collaborative projects to create and sustain innovation within and across schools.

When these projects are developed and connected it develops key individuals with a reimagined career trajectory, resources that are necessary to sustain their efforts and new practices that can be leveraged to engage the large numbers of people required to drive change and innovation within schools and across the educational industry (using, in this case, the Business UG programme as an example).

For us at Questrom, we have learned to drive change through creating projects and then stringing them together into a network of change. This would be true in our development of our experiential learning based MSMS programme and our new OMBA programme that will be delivered at scale.

In all cases, it started with WHAT problem were we trying to solve, WHO did we need to engage and then HOW would it all get done. The WHY of reimagining business education has to start somewhere, but for the WHY to be realised it has to be catalysed and developed through a sequence of networked projects that make manifest and accumulate that reimagined change.

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