

# From theory to practice: An action research study on personalised group coaching for authentic learning in business simulations

SEPIDEH FAROKHMANESH  
*Lecturer, University of East London*

**Keywords:** *Business simulation, personalised group coaching, action research, professional identity development, student engagement.*

## Abstract

Business education increasingly recognises the need to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application, yet students often struggle to apply concepts in real-world contexts meaningfully. This action research study investigates how personalised group coaching enhances experiential learning in Master of Business Administration (MBA) business simulations at the University of East London, contributing to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning by examining authentic learning environments in business education.

Grounded in constructivist and social learning theories, this study employed Kemmis and McTaggart's cyclical model (2005) to implement structured coaching interventions. Thirty MBA students participated in weekly coaching sessions over six weeks while working in five competitive simulation groups. Data were collected through mixed methods, including surveys, systematic observations, focus groups, and document analysis.

The findings reveal significant improvements in students' engagement with realistic business challenges, with 85% of participants reporting enhanced ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios. Students rated the effectiveness of coaching in facilitating real-world applications at an average of 8.9 out of 10. Qualitative data demonstrated progression in

From theory to practice: An action research study on personalised group coaching for authentic learning in business simulations © 2025 by Sepideh Farokhmanesh is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

authentic professional capabilities, including improved decision-making confidence and strategic reasoning.

This research demonstrates that personalised group coaching creates genuine learning environments that transform theoretical business education into accurate professional preparation. The findings suggest that embedding coaching within business simulations is an effective strategy for developing genuine professional competencies and enhancing student engagement.

## **Introduction**

The business education landscape has significantly evolved due to globalisation and technological advancement. As business practices change, traditional theoretical approaches alone no longer suffice to prepare graduates for real-world challenges (Abdullah *et al.*, 2013). Today's professionals must demonstrate both academic understanding and skills in creative thinking, communication, and interdisciplinary decision making (Buil *et al.*, 2019).

Business simulation exercises serve as an effective bridge between academic theory and industry practice. However, students often struggle with their complexity (Taylor *et al.*, 2012; Abdullah *et al.*, 2013), which can hinder both learning outcomes and professional readiness. This highlights the need for improved support mechanisms that promote authentic learning.

Coaching has been recognised as a powerful tool for developing professional skills and fostering authenticity in education (Robertson, 2000; Bremner, Sakata, and Cameron 2022). This study investigates how personalised group coaching in business simulations can create realistic business challenges that mirror real-world issues; facilitate decision making that aligns with industry practices; develop students' professional identities through reflection; and support assessments that measure the real-world application of knowledge.

## **The research question**

How does personalised group coaching in business simulation exercises influence students' professional development by enhancing authentic learning experiences?

Specifically, the study aimed to 1) explore how structured coaching

fosters engagement; 2) assess the impact of feedback on applying theory; 3) evaluate the coaching role in linking theory and practice; and 4) investigate professional skill development in authentic settings.

## **Context**

The University of East London (UEL) represents a distinctive setting within higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK), characterised by its diverse student population and commitment to inclusive learning. Situated within the UK HE framework, business education at UEL increasingly emphasises practical skills development alongside theoretical knowledge.

Key contextual factors influencing this study include a UK-wide focus on employability and authentic skill-building in higher education; integration of professional development within the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) curriculum; and alignment with government initiatives promoting innovative, practice-based learning.

The MBA programme at UEL aligns with both local and national priorities by responding to industry demands for graduates with strong practical experience. Within this programme, this study focuses on the Business Simulation with Professional Development module – one of the core components attracting students from various business specialisations, including strategy development, operations management, financial management, and marketing.

Traditionally, the module combines lectures, seminars, and simulation-based assignments. However, student feedback and performance data revealed three key challenges: 1) limited accurate guidance in applying theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios; 2) Insufficient opportunities for genuine engagement with business challenges; and 3) a lack of authentic feedback during complex decision-making processes.

These gaps particularly affect international students, and those with limited prior business experience, who often struggle with the real-world application of business theories within the simulation environment. To address this, a coaching intervention was introduced, incorporating weekly group coaching sessions that were designed to reflect real-life consultancy scenarios; problem-solving tasks based on actual business challenges; and continuous feedback to support authentic skill development.

By embedding coaching within business simulations, this intervention leveraged UEL's diverse and inclusive educational environment to foster authentic learning experiences among students.

### *Authenticity*

This research aligns with the journal's theme of 'authenticity' by demonstrating how personalised group coaching fosters genuine, real-world learning experiences in business education. The coaching intervention creates learning environments that bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, preparing students for the complexities of modern business practice.

Authenticity in this context manifests in several interconnected dimensions.

### *Authentic business challenges*

The coaching sessions integrate real-world business scenarios that mirror genuine professional challenges, moving beyond simplified textbook examples to engage students with the complexity and ambiguity characteristic of actual business environments. Students reported that these realistic challenges enhanced their ability to translate theoretical knowledge into practical application, with one participant noting, "The simulations felt like genuine business situations rather than academic exercises".

### *Authentic professional identity development*

Students develop realistic professional identities and behaviours through guided reflection and consistent feedback that aligns with industry expectations. The coaching process encourages students to move beyond surface-level understanding to develop genuine professional judgment and decision-making capabilities. As one student commented, "I began to think like a business professional rather than just a student completing an assignment".

### *Authentic assessment*

The intervention incorporates assessment methods that evaluate students' genuine ability to apply business concepts in realistic contexts. Rather than focusing solely on theoretical understanding,

these assessments encouraged real-world application and demonstration of professional competencies through real-time decision making and problem solving. This approach reinforces the value of practical, experience-based learning by rewarding genuine application rather than memorisation.

### *Authentic learning relationships*

The coaching relationship creates a unique learning community where instructors serve as mentors rather than mere knowledge providers. This reliable mentorship encourages students to engage honestly with their strengths and weaknesses, fostering personal growth. Students particularly valued the truthfulness of feedback received during coaching sessions, describing it as “more honest and useful than traditional academic feedback”.

These aspects of authenticity interweave throughout the coaching intervention, creating a learning environment that genuinely prepares students for business careers by developing both technical knowledge and authentic professional capabilities. By examining student experiences through this lens of authenticity, this study highlights how coaching interventions can transform business education from theoretical instruction to genuine professional preparation.

### **Positionality**

My dual role, as both a recent MBA graduate and current lecturer, provides valuable insights into business simulation learning environments. This dual perspective enriches my understanding of the challenges and opportunities within these educational contexts, particularly in fostering reliable learning experiences in business education.

Having experienced business simulations from both sides, I recognise that learning requires more than technical input – it requires empathetic, structured support that encourages genuine engagement with real-world business challenges. This realisation directly shaped the design of the coaching intervention.

My pedagogical approach aligns with transformative learning theory, drawing from Slavich and Zimbardo’s (2012) framework. I believe that education should empower students to move beyond content acquisition to practical application and self-awareness. My experience with diverse student cohorts reinforces the importance

of creating learning environments that value authentic expression and engagement with real-world business challenges. I aligned the coaching intervention with Bremner, Sakata, and Cameron's (2022) call for personalised learning strategies to cultivate authentic student engagement and decision making.

This positionality influenced how I designed the research, anticipating barriers to authenticity and actively embedding support mechanisms. Being both an educator and a former student enabled me to create a space where theory met professional reality.

## **Research approach**

Building on Kemmis and McTaggart's cyclical action research model, this study employed a systematic approach to investigating the impact of personalised group coaching within business simulation exercises. The research design prioritised both rigorous data collection and responsive adaptation to participant needs.

This action research project systematically implemented and evaluated a personalised group coaching intervention designed to foster authentic learning. The methodology encompassed several key steps to ensure the intervention's effectiveness and generate valuable insights.

This study was conducted using a nonlinear exploration method (Smith, 2018) to determine the effectiveness of personalised group coaching in business simulation exercises. This method allows for a deeper understanding of the complexity inherent in the research process.

In addition, this research project used reflective journaling, requiring students to document their thoughts, experiences, and insights throughout the coaching process, which provided valuable data for analysis and reflection on the authenticity of their learning experiences (Jones and Williams, 2008).

This research began with a recognition of the need to address a specific challenge within my teaching practice: the desire to enhance students' professional development by providing authentic support and guidance during business simulation activities. In this regard, the methodology encompassed several key steps aimed at ensuring the effectiveness of the intervention and generating valuable insights.

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was granted through the Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) in Learning and Teaching in HE programme. The ethics checklist was completed and approved before data collection, ensuring adherence to the principles of informed consent, participant confidentiality, and voluntary participation (Appendix 1).

## **Implementation**

The coaching sessions followed Jones and Williams' (2008) reflective practice model, emphasising continuous feedback and adaptation. This approach aligns with Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire's (2003) participatory action research principles, ensuring accurate engagement and responsiveness to participant needs.

## **Participant selection and group formation**

The study involved 30 MBA students in the Business Simulation with Professional Development module. Participants were divided into five competitive groups of six students each. This structure facilitated optimal group sizes for coaching effectiveness; individual attention within a collaborative setting; and dependable team dynamics mirroring business environments.

The selection process considered diverse professional backgrounds and experience levels to enhance authentic learning within each group.

## **Intervention structure**

The coaching intervention spanned six weeks, with weekly three-hour sessions designed to progressively build professional capabilities. Each session incorporated structured coaching activities aligned with realistic business challenges, facilitated discussion and feedback, individual reflection and goal-setting exercises, and progressive skill development activities.

This structure supported the development of authentic professional capabilities through structured coaching activities aligned with business challenges; meaningful dialogue and feedback; progressive skill development activities; and reflection and goal-setting exercises.

Throughout the project, the implementation process evolved, highlighting the complex and adaptive nature of action research. Student resistance to real engagement and the need to adapt coaching strategies to meet diverse needs added layers of complexity to the project. These challenges underscored the dynamic and iterative nature of action research, requiring flexibility and reflexivity in response to evolving circumstances.

In parallel with the implementation of the intervention, my own learning journey as a researcher also evolved through interactions with students, colleagues, and scholarly literature. Reflective practice played a central role in this process, allowing me to critically examine assumptions, refine approaches, and deepen my understanding of authentic coaching in educational contexts.

### **Data collection methods**

This research employed a dynamic, reflective data collection process aligned with the iterative nature of action research, unlike traditional methods, where data collection is often static. This approach mirrors the iterative nature of the action research process itself, as noted by Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire (2003) and evidenced through continuous feedback and real-time observations, enabling adaptive responses to students' evolving needs (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Rather than relying solely on pre-established instruments like surveys and interviews, I continually engaged with participants, observed their reactions, and interacted throughout the intervention. This real-time feedback loop ensured that the data collection process remained responsive and adaptable to the evolving needs and circumstances of the participants and the research context (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005).

### **Surveys**

- Post-intervention surveys were administered to participants to collect quantitative data on their perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported learning outcomes related to authentic learning experiences.
- The survey included Likert-scale questions to assess participants' ability to authentically apply business concepts, engage with genuine business problems, and develop authentic professional competencies.



- Post-intervention surveys measured changes in participants' responses after completing the coaching sessions.

### **Observations:**

- Observations were conducted during every coaching session to gather qualitative data on the authenticity of student engagement, the genuine application of business concepts, and the effectiveness of the coaching process.
- Observational data provided valuable insights into the implementation of the intervention, students' authentic participation, and any challenges encountered during the coaching sessions.

### **Qualitative feedback:**

- Qualitative feedback was obtained from participants through open-ended questions included in the post-intervention surveys.
- Participants were encouraged to provide detailed feedback on their authentic learning experiences with the coaching intervention, including perceived benefits, challenges faced, and suggestions for improvement.
- Additionally, focus group discussions or individual interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to further explore their perspectives on the authenticity of their learning experiences.

### **Document analysis**

- Relevant documents, such as students' reflections, coaching session plans, and other instructional materials, were analysed to supplement the data collected through surveys, observations, and qualitative feedback.
- Document analysis provided additional context and insights into the authenticity of learning experiences and outcomes of the coaching intervention.
- This multi-method approach provided comprehensive insights into the impact of coaching on authentic learning experiences, allowing for triangulation of findings across different data

sources. Thus, the chosen data collection methods are well-supported by existing literature and align with the intervention's goals.

## **Outcome and data analysis**

The analysis revealed compelling evidence of the transformative effect of personalised group coaching on student learning and professional development. By integrating structured coaching with experiential learning, the intervention fostered significant improvements in authentic engagement with business challenges; genuine application of theoretical concepts; and practical professional development.

### **Quantitative insights**

The quantitative data from this research highlight substantial positive outcomes in practical student learning and engagement. Survey responses indicate that 85% of participants reported increased ability to authentically apply theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios following the coaching sessions. Students rated the coaching's effectiveness in enhancing their real-world understanding at 7.9 out of 10, reflecting strong perceived value. Additionally, the impact on experiential learning was notable, with students assigning an average rating of 8.9 out of 10 for improvements in their ability to engage genuinely with business challenges.

### **Qualitative insights**

Observational data corroborate these findings, documenting a steady increase in authentic student interaction, critical thinking, and genuine decision making. As the coaching sessions progressed, students demonstrated greater authentic engagement, more nuanced analytical discussions, and a higher degree of genuine strategic reasoning in their simulation exercises. Moreover, 93% of participants stated that coaching played a vital role in helping them develop authentic professional capabilities within the course, reinforcing its role in fostering genuine professional development.

### **Theme of 'authenticity'**

A key outcome of this study was the development of authentic learning experiences that transformed theoretical business

education into genuine professional preparation. Coaching sessions encouraged authentic dialogue, genuine problem solving, and real-world learning experiences, with students valuing the opportunity to engage with business concepts in ways that reflected actual professional practice. One participant remarked:

“The coaching sessions created a space where we could genuinely engage with business problems rather than just completing academic exercises. This authentic approach made the learning feel relevant to our future careers”.

The development of practical professional competencies emerged as another critical theme that emerged from the findings. Both quantitative scores and qualitative reflections suggest that students developed genuine professional capabilities, including the ability to authentically evaluate complex business scenarios and make strategic decisions with real-world applicability. The high enhancement score of 8.9 out of 10 for real-world application of business concepts reflects this genuine professional growth. One student articulated this transformation:

“After several coaching sessions, I felt I was genuinely applying business theories rather than just memorising them. The regular authentic feedback helped me develop real professional judgment.”

This development of authentic professional capabilities was particularly evident in the later stages of the intervention. Initially hesitant, students progressively became more genuinely engaged, demonstrating authentic professional behaviours and applying theoretical concepts in ways that reflected real-world business practice.

### **Areas for improvement and future considerations**

Despite the overwhelmingly positive outcomes, the findings also highlight areas for further refinement. Some students expressed a desire for more authentic industry connections to reinforce the genuine applicability of their learning. Others suggested incorporating more diverse business scenarios to enhance the authenticity of the simulation experience. Furthermore, several participants recommended the inclusion of industry-specific case studies and real-world business scenarios within the simulations to enhance authentic professional preparation.

These insights provide valuable recommendations for future iterations of the coaching intervention. The findings suggest that expanding the authentic learning model to include industry mentorship could further enhance genuine professional development. Additionally, refining the applied learning strategies by incorporating more real-world business challenges, practice-based evaluation methods, and applied learning opportunities could amplify the impact of coaching sessions on genuine professional skill-building.

### **Limitations**

The research was conducted with a single group at one institution. Self-reporting can introduce potential bias, and the outcomes of coaching may differ depending on the facilitator. Future studies could benefit from incorporating longitudinal data and comparisons across multiple sites. It is important for upcoming research to consider using multiple cohorts or cross-institutional studies to explore the scalability and adaptability of coaching interventions.

### **Pedagogical implications for business education**

The findings offer valuable guidance for educators aiming to embed authentic learning in business curricula. The success of the coaching intervention underscores the importance of structured, student-centred support systems in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and authentic professional practice. The high levels of student engagement improved real-world application of business concepts, and the resulting enhanced genuine decision-making competencies highlight the potential for this approach to be adapted across various disciplines within business education.

Looking ahead, the evidence suggests that incorporating coaching methodologies as a core component of authentic learning curricula could enhance genuine professional skill development and create more engaged, capable, and career-ready graduates. By leveraging authenticity-driven learning strategies, educators can cultivate learning environments that empower students to navigate complex business landscapes with greater professional competence and genuine business acumen.

### **The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning contribution**

This study offers significant contributions to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), particularly in understanding how

personalised coaching approaches enhance authentic learning in HE. It provides a replicable framework for embedding personalised coaching to support authentic engagement in business education. The study aligns with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (2015) by demonstrating how students learn effectively through authentic cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation within the coaching framework.

The success of this intervention provides empirical evidence for the value of integrating coaching methodologies into traditional teaching approaches. Specifically, the research shows that when students receive personalised guidance within an authentic learning environment, they develop stronger professional competencies and a greater ability to genuinely apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations.

The study also highlights the importance of creating learning environments that support practical professional development. The high levels of student engagement and improved learning outcomes suggest that this authentic approach could be adapted across different disciplines within HE, particularly in areas where genuine application of theoretical knowledge is crucial.

## **Conclusion**

This action research project demonstrates the transformative potential of personalised group coaching in creating authentic business simulation learning. Through careful integration of coaching methodologies with experiential learning approaches, the intervention successfully enhanced students' industry-oriented growth and readiness, genuine application of business concepts, and meaningful student involvement with business challenges.

The findings align with current SoTL literature (Kolb, 2015; Slavich and Zimbardo, 2012) while offering new insights into the integration of coaching within authentic business education. As suggested by Bremner, Sakata, and Cameron (2022), the success of this intervention demonstrates the value of structured coaching support in enhancing experiential student learning outcomes.

The results reveal that structured coaching support can significantly impact students' ability to authentically apply theoretical concepts in practical contexts. The high levels of student satisfaction and improved learning outcomes suggest that this approach offers a

viable model for enhancing the authenticity of business education pedagogy.

Several forward-looking recommendations emerge from this research:

- Integrate regular coaching sessions within simulation-based learning environments as a standard approach to authentic pedagogy.
- Expand industry connections to further enhance the authenticity of learning experiences.
- Investigate digital coaching tools to supplement face-to-face interactions while maintaining authentic engagement.
- Explore cross-cultural adaptations of the coaching model for different authentic educational contexts.

As business education continues to evolve, the need for innovative approaches that bridge theory and practice through authentic learning becomes increasingly important. This study suggests that personalised group coaching offers a promising pathway for meeting this challenge while fostering the development of capable business professionals equipped with authentic, industry-relevant competencies.

## **Acknowledgements**

The Editorial Board sincerely thanks David Krygier and Dr. Mike Wride for their support in reviewing this piece.

## **Author**

Sepideh Farokhmanesh is a lecturer at the University of East London, where she teaches across MBA programmes and undergraduate degrees in hospitality, tourism, and events. She holds an MBA and a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (both awarded with distinction) and is a Fellow of Advance HE.

Sepideh's professional journey began in aerospace engineering, where she developed an analytical mindset, before transitioning to over a decade of experience in the luxury concierge and lifestyle industry. She is also the

founder of Lord of Chelsea Ltd, a London-based company offering bespoke corporate, travel and lifestyle services.

Authenticity is central to Sepideh's teaching philosophy. Drawing on her entrepreneurial background and experience as an international student, she creates inclusive learning environments that encourage critical reflection and dialogue. Her current research focuses on smart, sustainable solutions to overtourism in global cities, particularly how advanced technologies can reduce economic leakage and foster more equitable wealth distribution in destinations like London.

Sepideh is the author of the Tourist and Student Guide to Ukraine (2007) and has taught Persian, English, and Russian to diplomatic families. As a multilingual educator with diverse industry experience, she believes authentic higher education begins by valuing diverse perspectives and modelling reflective, practice-informed teaching that bridges theory with real-world application.

## References

- Abdullah, N. L., Hanafiah, M. H. and Hashim, N. A. (2013) 'Developing creative teaching module: Business simulation in teaching strategic management', *International Education Studies*, 6(6). Available at: <https://doi:10.5539/ies.v6n6p95>.
- Bremner, N., Sakata, N. and Cameron, L. (2022) 'The outcomes of learner-centred pedagogy: A systematic review', *International Journal of Educational Development*, 94, p. 102649. Available at: doi: <https://10.1016/j.ijedudev.2022.102649>.
- Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D., and Maguire, P. (2003) 'Why action research?', *Action Research*, 1(1), pp. 9–28.
- Buil, I., Catalán, S., and Martínez, E. (2019) 'Engagement in business simulation games: A self-system model of motivational development', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 51(1), pp. 297–311. Available at: <https://doi:10.1111/bjet.12762>.
- Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2014) *Doing action research in your own organisation* (4th edn). Sage Publications.
- Jones, P. and Williams, K. (2008) 'Reflective journaling in higher education: A review of the literature', *Journal of Reflective Practice*, 12(4), pp. 397–410.
- Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (2005) 'Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd edn.) Sage Publications, pp. 559–603.
- Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., and Nixon, R. (2014) *The Action Research Planner*. Singapore: Springer.
- Kolb, D. A. (2015) *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Robertson, J. (2000) 'The three Rs of action research methodology: Reciprocity, reflexivity and reflection-on-reality', *Educational Action Research*, 8(2), pp. 307–326. Available at: <https://doi:10.1080/09650790000200124>.
- Smith, J. (2018) 'Exploring complexity: A non-linear approach to research', *Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(2), pp. 145–162.
- Slavich, G. M. and Zimbardo, P. G. (2012) 'Transformational teaching: Theoretical underpinnings, basic principles, and Core methods', *Educational Psychology Review*. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3498956/> (Accessed: 22 March 2024).
- Taylor, A.-S. A., Backlund, P., and Niklasson, L. (2012) 'The coaching cycle', *Simulation and Gaming*, 43(5), pp. 648–672. Available at: <https://doi:10.1177/1046878112439442>.