Immersive Learning Practices at SCMS School of Technology and Management, Kochi, India – A Case Study

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Immersive learning is defined as a method where the students are immersed into a learning process, where a feeling of getting immersed is created either by use of technology or by using narratives such as a book. Training industry states that immersive learning "places individuals in a learning interactive environment either physically or virtually to replicate possible scenarios or teach particular skills or techniques." Engaging students in the classroom and making them learn is a biggest problem today. Dale (1969) pointed out that the retention among students is seen to be higher where they learn by doing things. Immersive learning helps students to get a feel of the topics taught. Of late, this concept of immersive and experiential learning has gained importance and more with the introduction of India's National Educational Policy 2020. This method focuses on providing a real time experience to students with an enhanced learning.

The objective of this case study is to investigate the teaching learning processes at SCMS School of Technology and Management (SSTM). Being under the university system it has certain limitations. This study tries to understand how SSTM bridges the gap that exists in the university curriculum to provide a holistic learning experience to the students of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. It tries to provide a glimpse of the immersive learning practices, strategies adopted and skills students acquire during their two years program at SSTM.

This case study uses a qualitative research design. This is a single intrinsic study that focuses on immersive learning practices at SCMS School of Technology and Management. Although the study is qualitative it uses quantitative data to support and justify the study. Required data was collected from various documents such as course plans, program schedules, student reports, evaluation sheets, placement records, and feedback. Data was also collected through observations and in-depth study of relevant documents. Immersive learning practices at SSTM are uniquely crafted to provide students a greater learning experience. These practices have been found to improve the various skills of students thereby preparing them to take up managerial roles in organizations. These practices have helped the students in their holistic development, enabling them to be successful in the placements drive.

Keywords: Immersive Learning, Experiential Learning, learning strategies

INTRODUCTION

A brief introduction of the Indian higher education

India has the largest population with 580 million people under the age 5-24 years (Cyrill, 2022). This is a huge opportunity for growth in the education sector. The education sector has been projected to grow at 225 million US dollars by 2025. All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) report 2019-2020 states that India is a treasure house of 1043 Universities, 42,343 colleges and 11,779 stand-alone institutions. The total enrollment in higher education is about 38.5 million students. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is currently 27.1 percent and is projected to rise to 50 percent by the year 2035. This describes the enormous size and the growth potential of the education sector in India. MBA is one of the most sought-after programs today. There are thousands of people writing the examinations for approximately 5,500 seats.

About SCMS School of Technology and Management

SCMS School of Technology and Management (SSTM), Cochin is one among the 42,343 colleges in India that came into existence in the year 2003 under the SCMS

Group. It is affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, India. It is one of the premier educational institutions in south India catering to the requirements of students in the higher education segment. This is promoted by the Prathap Foundation for Education and Training established in 1976 under the able and dynamic leadership of Dr. G.P. C Nayar, to impart education of the highest order at affordable costs. Started with MBA in 2003, today, SSTM is a center of excellence for many disciplines such as management, computer applications, biotechnology, psychology and commerce. It has certifications from National bodies, like National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and National Board of Accreditation (NBA) and now Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP).

Quality in teaching and learning is something that is given utmost priority at SSTM. Whatever be the circumstances, quality is never compromised. During the pandemic, SSTM was one of the first institutions to go online. Students never missed any sessions or any activities though online. All in-house activities were modified suitably. The management and faculty were responsible and committed towards students and also the need to support them mentally during these testing times. Students were given individual support through the modified activities to ensure the quality of the teaching and learning methods.

Teaching and learning at SSTM

SSTM Cochin provides a greater learning experience for the students. The two year course at SSTM is cautiously and progressively crafted to provide a better learning experience to the students. Being under the affiliation of the university, it has certain limitations. It has to go by the university program and the regulations provided by the same. Without compromising the university regulations, the twoyear program is so designed that it provides a boundless learning experience to students. With the introduction of National Education Policy 2020, all the more focus is on providing a better learning experience to students.

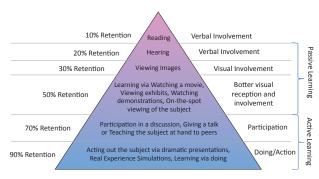
LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential learning is one of the popular methods used in education and training. This is an immersive method that focuses on providing a real time experience to students. Wikipedia defines "immersive learning as a method by which students get immersed into a virtual dialogue, where the feeling of presence is used as evidence of getting immersed. The virtual dialogue can be created in two ways- either by use of technology or by a narrative like reading a book." According to Gartner Glossary - "immersive learning environments are learning situations that are constructed using a variety of techniques and software tools including game-based learning, simulation based learning and virtual 3D worlds." Immersive learning is one of the best ways to impart knowledge and improve the skills of students. Kumar (2021) speaks about four modes of learning - visual, auditory, written and kinesthetic that help students with a better learning experience. According to him such initiative results in better engagement and interactivity. It also helps them to learn by doing. As it is programmed using technology, it can be used repeatedly for further clarification. Kumar (2020) differentiates immersive learning with that of experiential learning. Pagano (2013) in her work on immersive learning, discusses the importance of using design principles, particularly reaction, achievement and presence in creating a learning experience. Herrington et al. (2007) discuss the use of realism and authentic learning in realistic creations to create a simulated environment. Appelman (2005) discusses experiential modes are components of a learning environment that influence learners' perception and learning experience. Shing Ip et al. (2019) explain the use of immersive learning experience through MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses). Sengupta (2019) suggests four ways of providing learning experience to learners using simulations, game-based learning, augmented reality, virtual reality and 360 videos. Further, immersive learning experiences have been explored by using various dimensions such as education field, type of immersive technologies, role of technology, pedagogical strategies, interaction techniques, evaluation methods and challenges. Dengel (2022) discusses the various perspectives of immersive learning. According to the learning pyramid by Dale (1969), 90 percent retention happens when students get a feel of the subject through dramatic presentations, simulations and while they learn by doing. That active learning happens while they learn by doing. This model has been used to explain immersive learning experiences at SCMS School of Technology and Management.

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Figure 1

Learning pyramid



Source: Edgar Dale's Learning pyramid

METHODOLOGY

This case study uses a qualitative research design. This is a single intrinsic study that focuses on immersive learning practices at SCMS School of Technology and Management. Although the study is qualitative it uses quantitative data to support and justify the study.

Mostly secondary data has been used for the study. Required data was collected from various documents such as course plans, program schedules, student reports, evaluation sheets, placement records, and feedback. Data was also collected through observations and in-depth study of relevant documents.

FINDINGS

Experiential learning is one of the popular methods used in education and training. This is an immersive method that focuses on providing a real time experience to students. At SSTM, students are made to be involved in so many activities and they learn in the process. This case study shows a glimpse of the immersive learning that students undergo during their two years program at SSTM.

Broadly, the two years program can be divided into academic and non-academic programs. The academic programs are conducted as per the regulations of the university. Academic courses are enriched through various components. The faculty members are free to choose any of the components to enrich the learning. Mini projects, role plays, visits to industry, case studies, critical analysis, interviewing people and others form a part of experiential learning through academic courses. At SSTM, learning from non-academic courses are of paramount importance. A closer analysis will help in understanding the immersive learning that a student goes through during the two years course. Table 1 shows the nonacademic programs that are planned for imparting a better learning experience for the students.

Table 1

List of activities

#	First year	Second year	Both
1	Foundation	Surveys /	BK (Business
		Research	Knowledge
		projects	Sessions)
2	ELT (English	Konfidence walk	III (Institute
	Language Training)		– Industry-
			Interaction)
3	IMLP (Integrated	AMLP	Conference/
	Management	(Advanced	seminars
	Learning	Management	
	Programme)	Learning	
		Programme)	
4	Speakers' forum	Aptitude/	Live projects/
		Verbal/Logical	Internships
		Reasoning	
		Training	
5	OBT (Outbound	Etiquette	Social outreach
	Training)	training	activities –
			Parivartana/
			Lakshya
6	Club activities	Director's	PDP (Personality
		fireside	Development
			Programmes)
7		Specialization	Shikhar –
		Forums	Management
			Fest
8			IEDC
			(Innovation and
			Entrepreneurship
			Development
			Cell)

In this case study, some of the non-academic activities/extracurricular activities conducted at SSTM are narrated in detail indicating the various immersive learning techniques used to enrich the student exposure.

Integrated Management Learning Programme (IMLP)

IMLP is a flagship activity of SSTM directed towards skill enhancement of students. This is conceived to address the skills gap among the students at the beginning year. This ongoing process helps students

to improve their communication, interpersonal, team building, leadership as well as their organizing skills. The entire group is divided into smaller groups of 10 members. The themes are crafted by the faculty coordinators in a progressive manner. To start with, each group decides on a team name and a logo which is done as a logo launch. Here the students explain the meaning and the team's name and logo and what inspired them to do so. After this, the teams would be known by their selected names. Each year, according to the changing global scenario, different themes are suggested. Usually, the first round is named "International Markets" Each team decides on a country and presents on topics like geographical location, history, economy, currency, art and culture, cuisine, trade and business and others. This gives them an exposure to the world economy and also helps them to understand global markets. The next rounds focus on business or trending topics. Through the entire cycle, each team gets a chance to organize the event. The organizing team is responsible for planning and organizing the entire event. They prepare the invitations, arrange for the venue, invite faculty judges, maintain discipline and conduct the programme. The different roles are taken up by each team member and hence, the basic management functions of planning, organizing, directing/ delegating/staffing, coordinating are learnt. There is a 360-degree evaluation – where the presentation is evaluated by a faculty team as well as a student team.

Outbound training

This is a training given to the MBA students while doing their second semester. It is a three-day program in which the students are taken off campus, normally to a hill station, where they put into practice all the managerial skills and values they have learned in the classroom. This is done in collaboration with a thirdparty association. They work in groups and are given tasks that they complete as a team. For each activity, the members are different and as such they get to know each other very well. Some of the activities included in the OBT are team building activities, raft building and mountain climbing. Among these raft building and mountain climbing exercises are activities which they learn the most. In raft making, they are given a budget within which they have to source the materials for building raft-bamboos, tyre tubes, ropes and other materials. Based on this they get the materials. Then they build a raft within the limited time, which is closely monitored by the instructor. Once the raft is ready the team members sail in the raft to a certain point and return as

instructed. This is an excellent exercise, where they learn to source the resources, manage funds, build the raft and effectively utilize it by sailing in the raft. Not only this, they learn to work together, motivate each other, share their fear and apprehensions and also help each other. This exercise also helps them to shed the fear and explore the immense possibilities.

Mountain Climbing - This is another important activity while in OBT. The task here is to climb a mountain. Students are split into groups and they are taken on a trekking adventure. Here the instructor gives instructions regarding the exercise to begin with. They also carry needed first aid materials. They begin trekking with a lot of enthusiasm. After climbing a certain height, the instructor cautions the students that from that point they cannot turn back, as the mountain becomes very steep from that point. He also suggests that if anyone feels that they cannot climb, they need not climb further. There is anxiety and confusion created among students. They have their own apprehensions and for a moment they are unable to decide. But peer pressure, moral support from friends and team makes the students take a decision to climb further. It is seen that students help each other, disseminate information and make them cautious of the difficulties/ obstacles ahead. When they reach the top, it is a great feeling - a sense of achievement and accomplishment.

Advanced Management Learning Programme (AMLP)

This program is solely conceived keeping in mind the placement preparedness for students in the final year. The main objective is to equip them with necessary skills to face the corporate world. This is a highly focused, well-structured and cautiously crafted program. Preparation of resume, self-introduction, group discussions, mock interviews, situational analysis and brainstorming sessions form a part of this program. All these are conducted with ample seriousness and perfection. Through these sessions, students are identified who require extra support. The training is done by both in-house faculty and a team of external experts from the industry. Alumni involvement in placement training is also ensured so that the students learn from their seniors.

Industry Institute Interaction (III)

This is another important activity undertaken at SSTM. This is a platform where experts from the industry as well as academia are invited to share their corporate experiences and latest developments in industry with students. Students also get an opportunity to interact with these experts and enhance their knowledge. This is again a student driven program and weekly programme, where the resource person is identified and seeks approval from the faculty council. Once approved, they organize the entire activity. These activities help students to acquire practical insights from different domains and industries.

Social Immersion Project- Parivartana

Parivartana is a programme envisaged to fulfill the mission of the school "To be a center of excellence for value-based management education." Students get an exposure to be involved in different activities and projects to understand the sense of "giving back to the society."

Old Age Home/Orphanage visits – This is a program for students in the first year. This is usually undertaken during the Christmas holidays every year. Students in groups, identify an orphanage or an old age home and make the visit. They spent a day with the inmates, entertaining them with a lot of activities and also giving them gifts. The purpose of this is to make them aware that life is not rosy for many people and comparing those we are blessed with. They spend the whole day with them, enlightening them with activities and sharing happiness with the underprivileged.

Parivarthana – A yearlong program, each year a socially relevant theme is decided and students in groups visit schools/ other places, perform street plays on the allotted theme, thus creating an awareness on the topic among the young generation. Some of the earlier themes include drug abuse, violence against women, road safety, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) awareness, environment pollution, waste management, etc. Students are supported by the faculty team and for more clarifications, external support from the Government bodies are taken. Students imbibe these activities and also when they share, they feel a sense of commitment to the society.

Lakshya – It is an initiative of SSTM, where students and teachers impart education to school students as enrichment programs for them. Usually, the students in the final year take part in this program. Schools and their requirements are identified by the group and based on that training is provided to the school students. Some of such training provided are programs on MS Excel and Tally and LibreOffice Calc. Unnat Bharath Abhyan – This is another initiative under the Government of India funding. Villages are adopted by the school and they are supported according to their requirements. The activities included donations, training and many more.

Shikhar – This is an annual international management fest at SCMS. This is conducted with great pomp and show. This has a pan India representation as well as international representation of colleges. This is again a purely student driven program. To begin with, committees are formed by the coordinators. Then, each committee is headed by a coordinator. The committee members plan, decide and organize their allotted set of activities. Even though it is a student driven program, there are faculty members as coordinators to support and guide them when required. From committee formation to sponsorship, media relations, event planning, invitation, registration, venue, transportation, accommodation are planned by the students and presented before the faculty members and management team for approval. Once approved, they ensure that it is executed in the above said manner. There is great learning here. Planning, organizing, controlling, budgeting etc., are done by students. Students also prepare themselves for crisis management. They enjoy as well as learn a lot in the most practicable way. Not only learning, they also improve their leadership, communication, negotiation, creative, teambuilding and collaborative skills. They also learn to manage people well. This is one of the best practical exposures to the management theories and concepts.

DISCUSSION

The findings segment explores the details of the various non- academic activities conducted at SSTM for providing an immersive learning experience to the students. This discussion section centers around three important aspects:

- 1. Creation of the environment This focuses on the activity and the environment which provides an opportunity for the students to learn.
- 2. Feeling of experience This is the feeling that students experience through the activity creating an intensive learning experience.
- 3. Intensive learning outcomes The final outcomes that the students gain as a result of such immersive learning.

Table 2 provides a brief discussion of the various immersive learning activities at SSTM.

Table 2

The Outbound Training (OBT) Intensive Learning Experience

Creation of the environment	Feeling of experience	Intensive learning Outcomes
Rafting Experience		
Students were to build a raft and sail in the raft. They were given limited resources. They had to purchase it and use it effectively. Materials provided were: tubes, bamboo logs, ropes.	 Initially the entire team started brainstorming as to how to go about. They had not only to build the raft but they had to sail in the same across the river and come back. Safety was an important concern. The next concern was the limited resources Limited time for building Limited knowledge they had. On a hit and trial basis they construct the raft and prepare for sail amidst fear, confusion and uncertainty. 	 Decision making Effective utilization of resources. Group dynamics Communication Team spirit Trust Time bound Empathy Supportive Overcoming fear Feeling of achievement Conflidence Conflict resolution
Students were made to climb the mountain at Suryanelli, Munnar , Kerala	Everyone climbed to a certain height and then the instructor gave out further instructions. From that point, the mountain became steeper. Only those who could climb need to climb as one cannot return from that point. This created an anxiety among students. They had to decide for themselves whether to move forward or stay back. Lot of noise. Some stayed back and others decided to move on. For those who decided to move on further instructions were given to the students.	Improvement in: • Decision making • Leadership • relationship • Trust • Attitude • Helping each other • Empathy

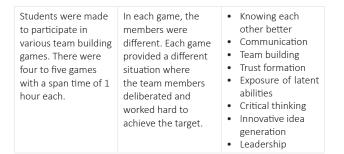


Table 3

show.

Integrated Management Learning Program (IMLP)

Creation of the	Feeling of	Intensive learning
environment	experience	Outcomes
Performing Teams		
Learning environment is created with a series of well-planned and scheduled activities. Includes: Logo launch Global awareness Business related topics for 5 phases in a progressive manner. Students are allowed to use various formats for their presentations. It could be a role play, a debate , presentation, a panel discussion and other similar formats	 Experience is impactful. They get to know the innovative and creative practices and would encourage each team to be innovative and creative. Logo launch helps them to decide on a name for their team and decide a logo and a theme for the same. Business related topics 	 Improvement in: Presentation skills Communication skills Eradication of stage fear Stage management On stage Crisis management Creativity and innovation Team building Attitude improvement
Organizing Teams		
Each team gets a change to organize the event- They arrange for the: • venue, • prepare invitations, • invite everyone • conduct the show – Prayer, Welcome speech, Vote of thanks, Master of ceremony • technical requirements, • seating arrangements • arrange for the judges (both faculty members and students) • arrange for evaluation sheets • Student Judges get to evaluate performance and give feedback • time keeping • all other activities required to organize the	Team members divide the responsibilities as well as share the responsibilities. They get a feel of organizing an event and contribute their best in doing so.	 Seek and share responsibilities Get an awareness of the necessities required to conduct a program. Planning skills Learn to invite people Organizing skills Team building skills Need for timeliness Maintenance of discipline and decorum. Evaluation and feedback skills

Table 4

Advanced Management Learning Program (AMLP)

Creation of the environment	Feeling of experience	Intensive learning Outcomes
 This activity is for the final year students to prepare them for the placement drive. These set of activities make them serious towards their approach to placements The activities involve a collective effort from faculty members, mentors, placement cell and the students. Activities decided for the include : Preparation of resume, Visume Self-Introduction, Group discussions, Mock interviews, Orientation on Job Description and preparation for interviews Case Analysis Situational analysis Aptitude tests 	Students experience the feel of industry. To give them a feel of real interviews, external experts, alumni, people from industry are roped in to get a feel of the industry.	 Improvement in : Aptitude Communication Body language Facing interviews Self introduction Connecting your own skills with job requirements. Handling situational questions Solving case studies Awareness of current affairs Handling stress interviews

Table 5

Industry Institute Partnership (III)

Creation of the	Feeling of	Intensive learning		
environment	experience	Outcomes		
As mentioned this is an activity, where experts from different industries speak to students regarding their experience.	Students get a feel of the industry. They get to know about the opportunities and challenges, skill requirements and the way ahead. They also get to know the personal experiences, hardships faced and the efforts taken by these experts to reach the current status.	 The industry environment Opportunities Challenges Skills requirements Effort required Experiences and hardships faced. Networking Global trends 		

Table 6

Social Immersion Projects

Creation of the environment	Feeling of experience	Intensive learning Outcomes
Old Age Home Visits – Mandatory for students to visit old age homes/ orphanages or similar organizations.	Students in groups decide on any such organization. They spend a day with them and engage them with various activities- such as talking to them, organizing some entertainment programs and games. They learn to understand them, become empathetic. This also provides an opportunity to understand how blessed the students are.	 Improvement in : Attitude Awareness of social problems Understanding others Empathy Motivation to help others Sense of contributing to societal welfare Understanding of the privileged life Creating a concern for the society
Parivarthana A month long program where the students visit various schools and conduct awareness programs on any socially relevant topic. Some topics covered: • Drug abuse • Road safety • Save water • Environment • AIDS awareness • Violence against women	Students come out with street plays to engage school students. They use different formats for dissemination of information.	 The purpose is to involve them in: Creating awareness Social commitment Addressing social stigmas. Imparting a value and Ensuring that they are not involved in such social evils.
Lakshya As a part of this , they go to various schools and take sessions for school students to educate them on different skills . Some of the training topics include MS Excel, Tally, Libreoffice Calc and other relevant areas	Students teach students of other schools-peer to peer learning happens and is effective.	 The purpose is to: Making students responsible Improving learning skills Social Commitment Networking
Unnat Bharat Abhyan – A government initiative through funding by AICTE	Nearby village schools are adopted and based on the requirement, they are provided with materials- like books, computers and other materials, Even training, seminars , workshops, awareness programs and others are conducted.	 Create an awareness Social commitment Helping the upliftment of village schools Provide services to socially backward sector

Table 7

Shikhar – Management fest

Creation of the environment	Feeling of experience	Intensive learning Outcomes
Shikhar – is the annual management fest conducted at SSTM. A student driven program where they arrange for resources, plan and manage and organize the events in the most effective manner. A mega event where we get hundreds of participants with a pan India presence.	Students get involved in activities such as : Fundraising by way of sponsorship Decide on the events Prepare an estimate of expense. Invitation Promotions Flash mob Entertainment Campus decor Registration	 Aims at improving : 100% participation from students and faculty Communicative skills Attitude development Planning skills Organizing skills Networking skills Creativity and innovation Critical evaluation Attitude improvement Crisis management Adaptability Empathy

IMPLICATIONS

SSTM is an institution affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala. It strictly adheres to the regulations prescribed by the university through its operations as far as the academic curriculum is concerned. It further enriches the curriculum by way of mini projects, activities, case studies, live projects and many more. Being affiliated to the university has its limitations. To fill up the existing gaps, SSTM strives hard to fine tune its various nonacademic or extracurricular activities to provide an intensive learning experience to the students. Only six among the various activities are discussed in this case study. These activities are planned in a progressive manner so as to bring about a complete development among the students both academically and professionally by the end of the two years program. Apart from the curriculum, such programs help in the holistic development in terms of various skills such as communication, networking, leadership, critical thinking, creativity and innovation, and other required skills for a business management professional. One area which is explicitly visible through these immersive learning experiences the students had is the placement. This has enabled us to improve the placement. Table 8 shows the details of the placement of the institution.

Table 7

Placement Statistics

Details of students	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
% of Students	75%	80%	85%	99%
placed				

These immersive learning experiences have helped the students to excel in their career – both in their enterprises and also in the society. These can be seen from the records of the alumni performance and feedback. As students, they have excelled in various competitions due to these practical exposures and the sense of value-based management education is instilled in them.

CONCLUSION

Immersive learning activities form an integral part of the teaching learning process at SSTM. Students get a better learning experience through these cautiously crafted activities. These activities are planned so as to fulfill the existing gaps in the university curriculum. SSTM attempts to enrich its academic program effectively. Understanding the importance of holistic development and to bring about the same, several experiential learning activities are planned. Such activities are planned as non-academic activities without disturbing the university curriculum. Only six among the various activities are discussed in this case study. But there are many more such activities of varying domains and thrust areas conducted with varied intensity depending upon the requirement. As discussed, students are made to work under a simulated environment which provides them a better learning experience that they imbibe and enjoy. The placement statistics show the efforts taken by the institute in this direction.



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