Vol 13 | Issue 4 (2025) | pp. 38-52

JOURNAL OF
Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

https://jpaap.ac.uk/

Active comparison: A strategy for building competence and confidence in experiential learning

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has long prioritised knowledge acquisition over skill development, often neglecting the competencies essential for workplace readiness. As globalisation and economic pressures reshape educational priorities, there is increasing pressure from employers and accreditation bodies to integrate experiential learning to enhance employability. Traditional assessment practices, however, often encourage students to focus on grades rather than developing transferable skills such as problem-solving, communication, and collaboration.

The need to create an environment that facilitates the practical application of accumulated knowledge and bridges the gap between theory and practice has emerged as a crucial topic of discussion within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This article explores active comparison as a pedagogical strategy for bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. Drawing on Nicol's (2020) DO-COMPARE-EXPLICIT framework, we examine how structured feedback mechanisms shift students' focus from assessment performance to competency development. Active comparison promotes self-regulated learning, encourages engagement with external comparators, and preserves student agency while maintaining educational rigour.

Using a case study from a business school setting, we demonstrate how embedding active comparison within experiential courses enhances students' confidence, competence, and employability. Findings indicate that students who engage with active comparison develop stronger evaluative judgement, leading to deeper learning and improved workplace readiness. The study also highlights the role of external partners in fostering authentic learning experiences, supporting the development of practical skills alongside disciplinary knowledge.

By advancing active comparison as a scalable and effective pedagogical tool, this article contributes to the discourse on employability-focused education. It provides a model for integrating experiential learning with structured feedback to better prepare graduates for professional success in an evolving labour market.

Keywords: experiential learning, active comparison, inner feedback, employability skills, graduate attributes

Introduction

Higher education has historically focussed on the transfer of knowledge, emphasising content mastery over skills development with limited focus on the cultivation of graduate competencies. Increasingly, there is pressure to provide students with opportunities to apply knowledge in complex, ambiguous contexts that mirror the workplace. Experiential learning has emerged as a promising strategy, yet assessment and feedback practices often lag behind in supporting this shift. This paper addresses this gap through an analysis of a feedback model that actively supports competency development within an experiential MBA module.

Practice context

Higher education has long prioritised knowledge acquisition over skill development, often neglecting the competencies essential for workplace readiness (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Clarke, 2018; Finch et al., 2016; Succi & Canovi, 2020). As globalisation and economic pressures reshape educational priorities, there is increasing pressure from employers (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Goriot et al., 2024; Tuononen et al., 2022) and accreditation bodies (Abbasi et al., 2018; Mainga et al., 2022) to integrate experiential learning to enhance employability (Amoroso & Burke, 2018; Mainga et al., 2022; Succi & Canovi, 2020)

The graduate skills gap

Developing graduate skills alongside subject-specific knowledge within the higher education curriculum is essential for preparing students to succeed in an increasingly complex and competitive global job market. While academic knowledge provides the foundational understanding of a discipline, employers consistently express desire for graduates to demonstrate transferable skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration alongside subject specific knowledge. These skills are often referred to as graduate attributes and can vary between institutions as they reach beyond knowledge and reflect the transferrable skills and attributes that a university community determines their graduates should have (Wong & Chiu, 2020). A 2021 report by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) revealed that almost 80% of employers believe that graduates lack the necessary skills to be work-ready upon entering the job market and that only 27% of students felt confident in demonstrating key employability skills critical for adapting to changing workplace demands and driving innovation and productivity across industries (CMI, 2021). These figures highlight a growing gap between the outcomes of higher education and the expectations of employers.

Beyond employability, embedding graduate skills within the curriculum supports students' personal and professional development and promotes lifelong learning. Bhatti et al. (2022) highlight that competencies like time management, self-awareness, digital literacy, and resilience are not only vital in the workplace but also contribute to lifelong learning and personal growth, equipping students to navigate both career challenges and opportunities. Moreover, by fostering a sense of agency and ownership, students are better equipped to make informed decisions and take responsibility for their learning and career paths. When embedded within academic programs, graduate skill development enhances the curriculum by creating a more holistic and meaningful educational experience aligned with the world of practice.

Limitations of traditional teaching and assessment

Despite this, traditional teaching and assessment practices often focus mainly on knowledge transfer and encourage students to focus on grade outcomes rather than developing the transferable skills needed for the workplace (Fischer et al., 2023; Souto-Otero et al., 2023; Velasco, 2012). Institutions are therefore being urged to move beyond traditional content delivery models and incorporate pedagogies that support the cultivation of graduate competencies. Embedding experiential learning in higher education can offer staff and students the opportunity to achieve this goal, enabling the development of graduate skills alongside academic knowledge.

Experiential learning as a pedagogical solution

Experiential learning activities such as workshops, simulations or project work, bridge the gap between theory and practice by immersing students in real-world experiences that complement and reinforce taught theory. They enable students to apply academic concepts in authentic contexts, deepening their understanding and developing key professional competencies. Taking a more hands-on approach to

learning fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork, which are among the most sought-after graduate attributes. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory highlights the significance of learning through engaging with and reflecting on hands-on experiences suggesting that knowledge is constructed through the transformation of experience, making experiential activities essential for deeper learning and skill development.

In our context of business education, using real world business case studies helps students turn theory into practice. Taking this a step further and enabling students to work with real organisations on real business challenges takes a more authentic approach to experiential learning, increasing motivation and enabling students to learn more effectively (Lombardi & Oblinger, 2007). This approach to learning advocates that students experience tasks and challenges that mirror or are actual real-world scenarios, giving learners the opportunity to tackle complex issues, make decisions, and reflect on the consequences of their choices. Instead of passively receiving information, students actively build knowledge by engaging with authentic problems and applying their existing knowledge in relevant contexts (Rule, 2006).

Challenges and risk mitigation in external partnerships

There are, however, challenges for all involved when students are working with external organisations. There is often a worry that as students are still learning there is a risk to personal, professional and institutional reputation. To try and manage this, teachers often try to implement more controls throughout the exercise or course, leading to increased workload. Students can often feel underprepared for practical tasks such as meeting representatives from organisations for the first time, conducting meetings or planning. If these meetings do not go well, organisations may pull away from students and disengage, damaging their confidence, and they may not engage with a course or institution again in the future. One way to mitigate risk is to design courses so that student contact with the outside world is minimal by using case studies or simulations. However, this would limit students' development. A more realistic choice is to scaffold students' preparation for these tasks by employing an active comparison approach where students generate feedback even before key events take place.

Case Study

This case study focuses on a capstone MBA consultancy course as an applied example of how, through embedding active comparison within a course, students are supported in developing graduate attributes with confidence and self-efficacy and how educators can help foster a lifelong capacity within students to develop their own feedback in the workplace. Nicol highlights that this internal feedback process, through making comparisons and observations, can be more important than the formal feedback that students are used to receiving and can lead to a richer overall learning experience (Nicol, 2020).

In more traditional course design, where the majority of the assessment weighting focuses on an individual submission, the summative assessment encourages students to focus on the assessment itself rather than on developing the skills and expertise as the course intended (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Embedding active comparison within class activities can shift students' focus on assessment outcomes to also being focussed on skills development.

The active comparison approach

At the outset, it is important to clarify that the comparators used in this model extend beyond peer comparison and simple exemplars that rely on teacher feedback. Through this approach, students learn to

build their own feedback using similar and dissimilar resources. In this study, students compare their outputs to a variety of curated resources provided including an AI generated plan, a medical training video showing an Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE), a curated article excerpt detailing consulting practice, live client interactions, and peer discussion. This range of comparators is introduced up front to avoid misinterpretation and are examples of far comparative resources in that they are dissimilar to the original piece of work which is a client meeting plan.

The course integrates consultancy projects with live external clients adopting Nicol's (2020) DO-COMPARE-(make)EXPLICIT model as a central framework for formative assessment design.

The active comparison approach works like this:

i) students DO/CREATE something; their own approach to a challenge or a task;

ii) then they COMPARE their work or performance against another resource or resources;

iii) then make specific outputs – writing feedback comments or make improvements to the original work (EXPLICIT).

Resources might be artefacts such as documents or videos or anything that contains relevant information, or they can be comments from other students, clients or teachers written or provided during a dialogue. Active comparison is powerful; it can enhance student learning in the classroom, particularly in experiential settings where students are challenged to create and apply their knowledge to real-world scenarios.

The DO COMPARE EXPLICIT active comparison process

Having been identified as a critical point of where things can start to go wrong for the consultancy projects, the intervention focuses on the first live client meeting. One challenge that students face in experiential settings is being underprepared for practical tasks, such as when students meet a client for the first time and the MBA consultancy project was no different to any other course or cohort. Students often do not prepare adequately for this meeting or even 'wing it', with resultant adverse impacts on both the first meeting and ongoing project. Having been identified as a critical point of where things can start to go wrong, the intervention focuses on the first live client/student meeting.

Scaffolding

Rather than just telling the students what to do or providing templates and guidelines to copy or that may not be used correctly, if they are used at all, the students attend a workshop where they use different resources and dialogues to prepare for the meeting. These include:

- Article comparisons: Students compare their plan with a short excerpt from an article that describes how professional consultants meet with clients and how they establish credibility and resonance. After this they update their plan.
- Peer comments comparison: Students then meet with their team and are asked to discuss their own individual plans and then to create a single team plan. Again, students are asked to update their own individual plan following this comparison.
- Video doctor-patient discussion comparison: Students then listen to a video of a student doctor conducting an appointment with a person presenting with chest pains is then played and students are asked to compare their meeting plan to the video and to make any improvements.

- Mentor feedback comparison: The teams then present their meeting plans to their expert mentor and make any improvements following the discussion.
- Client meeting comparison: The last step is the client meeting itself and students are asked to reflect on how the meeting went and how effective their plan was and to make any subsequent improvements such that they could use the plan in the future.

The DO COMPARE EXPLICIT process in action

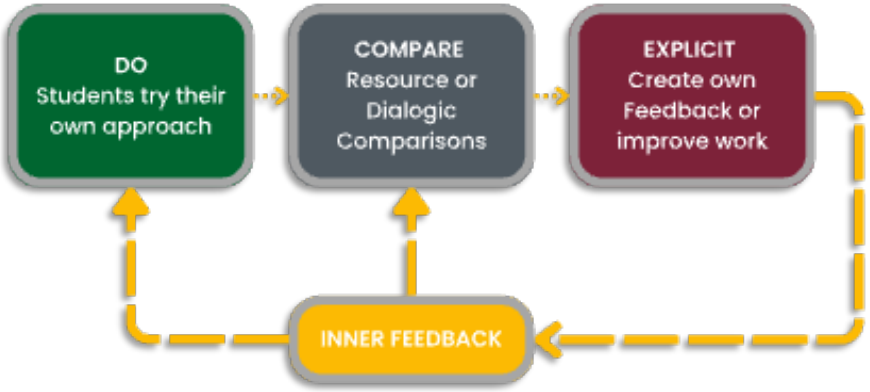

Figure 1 Nicol's (2020) DO COMPARE (Make) EXPLICIT framework showing the active comparison process.

Figure 1 highlights Nicol's (2020) approach of DO-COMPARE-(make) EXPLICIT, which the students follow. To begin with, students are given a short client brief which highlights the challenge that the client is facing. Before attending the workshop, each student is asked to familiarise themselves with the client brief and then craft their own bespoke meeting plan for that crucial first encounter (DO) which should enable them to clarify the client's expectations and deliverables for the project and to create resonance with the client themselves. They are given free rein as to how they do this: some sketch flowcharts or tables, others write scripts or bullet-point agendas, and a handful even produce quick cartoons or storyboards to map out the flow of conversation. They are not supplied with a template, forcing every student to think creatively about how best to structure introductions, questions and closing remarks. This unstructured freedom means that plans range from visual infographics to linear question lists and ensures that each student has full agency over the development of their initial approach rather than merely copying a 'one-size-fits-all' model.

Resource 1 – AI meeting plan (similar resource)

The students use their individual draft plans as the starting point for the workshop where they are quickly introduced to the second resource (COMPARE) that they will use: a generic meeting plan generated by ChatGPT. With a simple prompt: "Create me a meeting plan to meet a client for the first time", the AI's suggested sequence is shared on screen. Instantly, students spot familiar building blocks such as icebreakers and agenda-setting statements, but they also identify several irrelevant or overly formal elements: questions about funding or costs that add no real value, broad questions that fail to probe underlying needs, and vague closing remarks that lack direction. They are then asked to compare this generic output with their own individual plans, noting both the useful fragments they might borrow and the superfluous padding they should probably avoid. As they debate which AI-generated elements enhance their approach, for example a clearer way to structure opening questions, and which they should discard, they revise their plans, consciously sharpening focus on client needs and discarding anything that feels inauthentic or unhelpful (make EXPLICIT).

Resource 2 – The OSCE video (dissimilar resource)

Having contrasted personal creativity with artificial uniformity, the workshop moves into a far-comparison phase by screening a short Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) video of a final-year medical student taking a patient history from someone presenting with chest pain. As the students watch, they are prompted to observe key moments: for example, how the doctor quickly builds rapport and how he uses open-ended questions to draw out vital information. At this point, the video introduces the ICE framework (Insight, Concerns and Expectations) which medical professionals routinely use to structure consultations. The video is paused after the ICE model is presented in full and students are asked to identify elements which might improve their plans. They note how the doctor generates empathy with the patient and how he uses open questions to explore the problem without jumping to diagnosis.

Students often recognise the ICE model as a useful technique for exploring what a client knows about their challenge, what they are worried about or what they have already tried and what they expect from the consulting process. The class then return to their meeting plans and ask themselves: where could I weave in an ICE-style probe? They might add a prompt to ask clients, “What do you think is at the heart of this challenge?” or include a line to clarify, “What would success look like for you today?” By incorporating the ICE model, they learn to develop the brief in a structured way, examining the client’s own understanding, worries and ambitions, before offering any recommendations.

Resource 3 – The article excerpt (dissimilar resource)

With refinements complete, students are then given a short excerpt from an academic article on “learning-credibility tension” (Bourgoin & Harvey, 2018), which explains how professional consultants deliberately craft resonance, relevance and substance in that all-important first meeting. They compare this expert guidance to their own plans, looking for places where they need stronger credibility statements or moments to emphasise relevance to the client’s context. For instance, they might realise they overlooked a step to summarise the client’s background and reassure them of their own expertise before diving into questions. After discussing the article in small groups, each student makes a further round of edits; tightening their opening statements, clarifying the purpose of each question, and planning explicit closing comments that reinforce the relationship and confirm next steps.

Resource 4 – The team plan (dialogic)

By now, each student has compared their plan to four distinct resources: personal creativity, AI-generated structure, a medical video, and academic theory, each time generating self-feedback and making explicit improvements. At this point, they transition to team mode and students are asked to create single plan for the whole team to use in the client meeting. The teaching team observes as they negotiate and compromise, annotating their own copies with notes on why particular elements were included or dropped.

Resource 5 - The client plan (non-similar)

Once the team plan has been completed, the groups are presented with the final comparative resource: the real client meeting itself. Each team takes their shared plan into their first live consultation, where they introduce themselves, work through their questions, build credibility and relevance as they go, and close with clear next steps. In these live meetings the teaching team takes a step back, and most often are not present at all, allowing the students to put their meticulously honed plans to the test. The clients and therefore these meetings belong to them and again, they maintain complete agency over this aspect. Some

teams find that a question sequence flows perfectly; others discover that clients needed more breathing space between topics. No matter the outcome, the meeting becomes a rich source of feedback.

The class reconvenes a few days afterwards to debrief. Each student reflects on how the meeting compared to their plan: Which prompts revealed unexpected concerns? Where did credibility statements fall flat? Which sections of the plan felt too rigid? They are encouraged to capture these reflections as final tweaks; recording, for example, a revised phrasing for a closing summary or a more focused way to probe for expectations. They leave with a living document: a personalised meeting plan refined through five stages of active comparison.

The active comparison approach: Full session resources

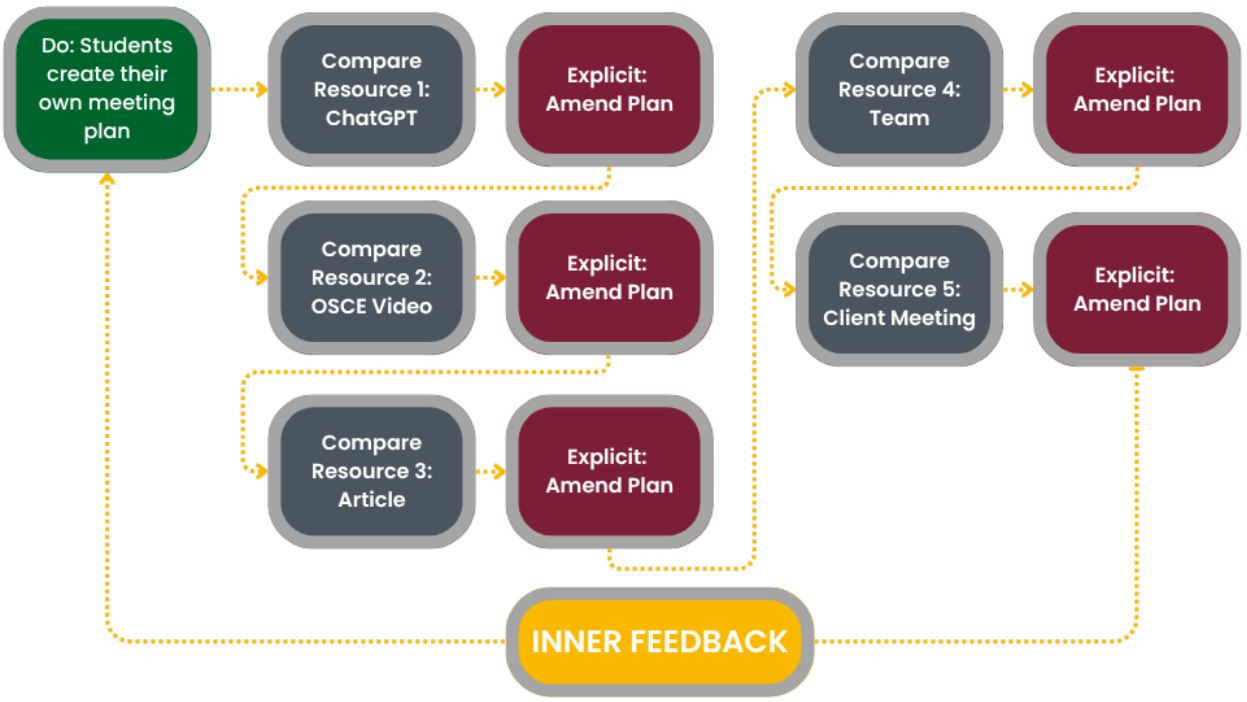

Figure 2 The use of multiple resource and dialogic comparisons running throughout the meeting plan session.

Role of the educator in active comparison

Throughout this journey, the role of the teacher is to orchestrate the sequence of resources as highlighted in Figure 2: the client brief, AI sample, OSCE video, academic article, peer work and the live meeting, while giving students clear instructions at each step to compare and refine. Students are never provided with a single 'perfect' template; instead, they are guided through multiple comparisons so that they generate their own feedback and internalise the learning. By layering contrasting perspectives, they develop a deep, experiential understanding of how to structure a first client meeting, how to listen and probe using the ICE framework, and how to build credibility authentically without ever actually being told how to do this. At the end of the workshop, every student walks into that crucial first meeting not with a generic checklist, but with an authentic plan they have created, tested, and continuously improved, equipping them with the confidence and competence to engage professional clients from the start.

Reflection

Methodology

The case study draws on data collected from two different cohorts of a postgraduate MBA module that integrates consultancy projects with live external clients. The module adopts Nicol's (2020) DO-COMPARE-(make) EXPLICIT model as a central framework for formative assessment design. Qualitative data were collected over two years with sources including anonymised student feedback, post-course focus groups and peer feedback. Students were also asked to record the changes they had made following each resource activity or discussion, providing insight into the impact of the comparators and the development

of the students' thinking (explicit). Classroom observations and staff debrief notes were also used to provide additional context. In addition to student data, clients were asked to complete a net promoter score which was followed up with a discussion around how the teams performed, part of which was around the professionalism and preparedness demonstrated by the students. Furthermore, an external peer observation with the School Learning Innovation Officer provided actionable insight and validation of the approach. The study involved 62 MBA students across two cohorts, with a balanced demographic split of genders and a majority of students from international backgrounds (15 nationalities). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee prior to data collection (BOLT: 400170120).

A thematic analysis approach was used to identify key patterns related to student engagement, learning behaviour, and perceived competence. While the outcomes are encouraging, several limitations were noted. Comparator overload occasionally left students unsure which resource to prioritise and this requires careful facilitation from educators to ensure that the instructions are clear throughout on how best to engage with resources. The use of dissimilar resources also presents a potential challenge for candidates looking for a simple exemplar; while the doctor–patient analogy provided useful transferable insights, some candidates reported that the comparison was initially confusing, although the majority reference the impact of the ICE (Insights, Concerns, Expectations) framework in particular as being very applicable. Candidates do recognise that, with hindsight, these resources are helpful but in the moment, they can be less engaged as they do not recognise the immediate relevance to the task in hand. Again, careful instructions and facilitation are important here, recognising that resources are not necessarily exemplars but rather assets to be further used to develop students' work.

Key features and implications

Analysis of the multiple data sources; anonymised student reflections, workshop activity sheets, focus groups, client feedback, peer-review records and a peer observation (School Learning Innovation Officer), revealed evidence for three principal outcomes:

- Increased agentic engagement,
- Strengthened evaluative judgement,
- Heightened authentic professional alignment.

These findings are accompanied by practical suggestions for implementation and implications for educators seeking to embed active comparison within their own programmes.

The core innovation of our active comparison model lies in its deliberate use of multiple, non-identical comparators to stimulate students' self-regulated learning and agentic engagement. Simply put, different comparators lead to different kinds of feedback. Rather than just furnishing students with exemplars, i.e. a professionally created meeting plan or outputs from previous cohorts, this approach challenges learners to make their own natural comparative process more explicit. The range of comparisons (both resource and dialogic) is similar to what students might have in a work environment or professional scenario. These non-similar comparators help students to generate feedback through critical reflection and peer dialogue.

Increased agentic engagement and self-regulation

A persistent theme across all data sets was students' assumption of ownership over both their learning process and the quality of their meeting plans. From the initial individual drafts through to the final group

proposals, learners actively sought out comparator insights rather than passively awaiting instructor feedback. Students assume full responsibility for evaluating and refining their own meeting plans. By amending or improving their draft agendas against the provided comparative resources and dialogue, they identify strengths and gaps independently, fostering a sense of ownership over both process and outcome.

The approach offers student choice and encourages reflexivity. Learners select which comparator insights to adopt, adapt or discard. This freedom to navigate through multiple comparative sources cultivates reflexivity with students routinely questioning their underlying assumptions, testing alternative approaches and iterating their plans. For example, many students reported deliberately selecting which elements of the doctor–patient consultation video to emulate, such as the doctor's practice of repeating patient statements for clarity and using open-ended questions and adapting these practices to suit client interactions in their draft plans.

Students noted discrete comparator attributes (e.g. tone, question sequencing, non-verbal cues) and mapping these against their own approaches. This prompted metacognitive engagement; they planned: "I will ask open questions to elicit more detail", monitored: "I notice I'm defaulting to closed questions" and evaluated: "The video showed sustained eye contact; I need to incorporate this". Their inquiry became more collaborative through individual and team engagement in critical dialogues, asking probing questions such as "How might our tone influence stakeholder resonance?" or "Does our question sequence generate open-ended responses?". These discussions not only deepen subject matter understanding but also sharpen interpersonal and negotiation skills which are central to consultancy practice.

Such self-regulatory practices mirror professional consultancy, where practitioners reflect-in-action, iteratively refining approaches based on intuition developed through previous experience and ongoing reflective feedback loops (Schön, 1983).

Quantitative feedback from surveys corroborated these observations: the majority of students agreed that the active comparison tasks enhanced their confidence in planning professional meetings, and over 70 per cent reported they felt more capable of independently diagnosing gaps in their work without instructor prompts.

Strengthened evaluative judgement

A second theme centred on the development of evaluative judgement; the capacity to appraise the quality of one's own and peers' work against evolving criteria. Initially, many students fixated on "getting it right" or matching an assumed exemplar. Through successive comparison cycles with dissimilar (video, journal article) and similar (peer plans) entities, feedback discussions shifted from evaluative "This is how close my work is to yours" to developmental critiques: "How might rearranging our agenda sequence improve stakeholder engagement?".

Class observations noted that instructors facilitated this shift by modelling reflective questioning "What difference does this change make for the client?" rather than prescribing correct answers. As a consequence, dialogues (peer to peer and student to teacher) became richer, with students offering evidence-based suggestions grounded in specific comparator attributes. For example, noting how the doctor's structured approach to questioning might translate to a client's need for clarity on deliverables. This marks a departure from traditional rubric-driven feedback towards dynamic, process-oriented critique.

Through explicit mapping of their thought processes against comparator benchmarks, students become acutely aware of their cognitive strategies. This metacognitive framing aligns with key employability frameworks emphasising confidence, adaptability, problem-solving and lifelong learning. Moreover, the act

of self-assessment against diverse comparators (video, peer dialogue, article, ai generated content) hones transferable skills: drafting clear communications, structuring meetings effectively and managing stakeholder expectations. These competencies are routinely cited by employers as critical for graduate employees.

Heightened authentic professional relevance

Engagement peaked when comparator materials authentically mirrored workplace contexts. Although the doctor–patient video is, ostensibly, outside management studies, students intuitively extracted transferable skills: empathy, active listening, synthesis of information, recontextualising them to a consultancy setting. One student reflected that observing the doctor's practice of securing confidentiality and checking understanding prompted them to add a "confidentiality statement" slide to their meeting plan, thereby enhancing perceived professionalism. A number of students specifically commented on the doctor's use of the ICE (Insight, Concern, Expectations) approach as directly relevant to consultancy even though it is a widely used framework in medical, veterinarian and dental practice.

External stakeholder involvement, particularly the live clients, further underscored authenticity. Feedback from clients highlighted the importance of getting the first meeting right and specifically highlighting how well the students had conducted themselves from a professional perspective. Students reported valuing this external insight more highly than instructor comments, noting that it "felt like real workplace feedback" and "prepared me for consulting scenarios". This feedback is itself, of course, a final comparative dialogue which students can use to further enhance their practice.

By mimicking the natural feedback processes of consultancy, where practitioners draw on prior projects and experience, stakeholder conversations and peer advice, the model bridges academic exercises and workplace realities. This authenticity not only motivates learners but also helps them internalise the iterative cycles of planning, feedback and revision that define professional practice.

Teacher workload and facilitation dynamics

While the active comparison model shifted the substantive feedback generation process to students, it does necessitate careful resource curation, facilitation and planning. Instructors invested substantial time upfront in curating and assembling a range of comparative resources; selecting practitioner videos and articles, as well as drafting peer-review prompts and configuring online reflection forms. Once established, however, these resources are readily reusable for subsequent cohorts, minimising the need for repeated exemplar creation.

Facilitation time during workshops was notably leaner: rather than giving feedback for individual drafts, instructors monitored group discussions, intervening strategically to deepen dialogue or clarify misconceptions. Class observers noted that two staff members were more than sufficient to guide 40 students across the comparison cycles, with minimal idle time or confusion and in practice, the authors have found that the facilitation can be handled easily by one facilitator. The bulk of any workload is outside the classroom in the preparation. During the sessions, the 'teaching' time is reduced and allows for a more active methodology where the teacher facilitates the discussion, presents resources and guides the students through the process. A further implication is the skill development of educators themselves. Facilitating active comparison requires moving from a didactic stance to one of active or student centred guidance. Staff noted that experience in questioning techniques, managing dialogic comparisons, and supporting reflective practice was important in order to deliver the approach effectively.

Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated the efficacy of employing an active comparison approach, rooted in Nicol's (2020) DO-COMPARE-MAKE EXPLICIT framework, within an MBA capstone consultancy course. By asking students first to *do* (draft a meeting plan), then to *compare* it with a carefully curated sequence of resources, and finally to *make explicit* revisions, we have fostered authentic, self-regulated learning that echoes professional practice.

Our findings indicate that this method addresses a common shortfall in experiential teaching for consultancy: inadequate preparatory work for initial client meetings, which can jeopardise project outcomes and institutional reputation. Rather than supplying exemplars, we provided diverse comparators, an excerpt of an article on consultant credibility, an AI generated peer meeting plan, a clinical consultation video, facilitator and peer dialogue and live client interaction, each prompting students to identify process strengths and gaps. This iterative comparison not only scaffolds the development of competencies such as question design, building stakeholder rapport and agenda structuring, but also cultivates and sustains agentic behaviour: students assume ownership of their learning, selecting which comparator insights to adopt and adapt in their own work.

A primary advantage of this approach is its positive impact on teacher workload. Once comparator materials are assembled, faculty time shifts from providing individual feedback to facilitating focused workshops and guiding peer moderation. Our experience shows that the model is both scalable and sustainable for large cohorts.

Embedding authentic stakeholders, such as live clients, as comparative resources, enhances the credibility of feedback, bridging the gap between academic exercises and workplace expectations. Students consistently reported that external input felt "like real consulting" and increased their confidence in professional readiness. This external dimension underscores the model's alignment with graduate employability frameworks, emphasising adaptability, evaluative judgement and reflective practice; qualities identified by employers as essential yet often underdeveloped in higher education (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Suggestions for Implementation

For practitioners wishing to implement this approach, we propose the following steps:

1. **Curate a comparative resource library**
   Assemble a diverse suite of comparators: videos, articles, peer artefacts etc., tagged with intended learning outcomes to guide student selection.

2. **Scaffold reflection**
   Develop structured tools (e.g. reflective journals or digital forms) that prompt students to reflect on, and evaluate, their work against comparator resources.

3. **Engage external partners**
   Brief alumni, mentors and clients on comparator tasks and reflection prompts, harnessing their professional insight to bolster the authenticity of feedback.

4. **Iterate and calibrate**
   Collect student feedback on comparator relevance and refine resources through periodic debriefs and analytics from reflection.

This model carries several implications for higher education professionals. Firstly, it offers a scalable means of embedding skill development within curricula, combining knowledge acquisition with employability outcomes. Secondly, it cultivates a culture of reflective practice: as students internalise metacognitive strategies, they become lifelong learners equipped to navigate complex, ambiguous professional environments. Thirdly, it calls for faculty development: educators require support in designing comparator materials and facilitating self-directed feedback sessions, underscoring the need for institutional investment in teaching innovation.

While the case study is situated within an MBA consultancy module, the active comparison approach is adaptable to any discipline where students engage in applied tasks requiring stakeholder interaction or professional judgement. The use of varied, non-identical comparators (e.g. AI-generated content, practitioner videos, peer dialogue) can be tailored to different subject areas, for example health sciences, law, or education, offering a model to enhance evaluative judgement and self-regulated learning across curricula. Transferability beyond the presented context of consultancy and client interaction should be considered cautiously. Other disciplines may require careful consideration of resource choices and substantial adaptation, particularly where client facing or consultancy elements are absent (law might be similar although sciences may prove more challenging). In these areas, active comparison might instead use case law documents, lab protocols, or peer reviewed exemplars as comparators. We therefore present this as a case study with practical implications for other disciplines rather than a universally generalisable model.

Looking ahead, our ongoing research will examine the transferability of active comparison feedback across levels (undergraduate, postgraduate, executive education) and disciplines beyond business. We aim to build an expanding repository of comparators and case exemplars, alongside robust measures of impact on student competence and confidence. By doing so, we hope to refine a pedagogical blueprint that bridges theory and practice, empowers student agency and alleviates instructor workload, ultimately developing graduates who are not only knowledgeable, but also self-regulated, reflective and professionally adept.

Biographies

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