

Chapter # 7

HACKATHONS IN THE ERA OF GRAND CHALLENGES: A tool fit for management education objectives?

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ABSTRACT

In management education, hackathons have become a popular tool, originally designed to foster technology prototyping. This study examines their suitability for tackling grand challenges like climate change, poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability. It focuses on hackathons for sustainable development held at a business school since 2016. Adopting a multi-stakeholder approach, the research includes data from students, professors, programme management, and external stakeholders via questionnaires and interviews to analyse one specific hackathon. The findings reveal that each group attributes different value to the hackathon experience, leading to significant tensions. The study, therefore, advises caution in adopting hackathons as a one-size-fits-all solution for teaching complex grand challenges. Ultimately, the research suggests that hackathons fail to satisfy all stakeholders simultaneously. This highlights the need to adapt the hackathon format to specific contexts to maintain its pedagogical integrity. These insights are crucial, given the growing emphasis on multi-stakeholder approaches in sustainable development education and the widespread use of hackathons in higher education.

Keywords: hackathons, grand challenges, practice-based tools, management education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The nature and purpose of management education, as well as the future of business schools, are ongoing debates (Thomas & Ambrosini, 2021), particularly regarding their practical relevance (Ferlie et al., 2010; Schoemaker, 2008). This debate has intensified with the focus on grand challenges (Howard-Grenville et al., 2014; Ferraro et al., 2015) and how well management education prepares students for complex sustainability issues (Nonet et al., 2016; Arevalo et al., 2020). Montiel et al. (2020a) call for new pedagogical practices, but their popularity does not always ensure effectiveness.

One such practice is the hackathon, originally from the IT sector (Briscoe & Mulligan, 2014; Komssi et al., 2015; Macedo Guimarães et al., 2021), now adapted by corporations to include marketing, design, sales, and even customers (Canopé, 2017; Aillerie, 2020). In management education, hackathons are used to teach innovation and entrepreneurship (Suominen et al., 2018; Porras et al., 2019; Page et al., 2016), and to promote responsible management through “green hackathons” (Zapico et al., 2013). However, critiques remain in both industry and academia (Fabbri et al., 2018; Endrissat, 2019). This study examines whether hackathons are fit for purpose in management education, particularly in addressing grand challenges. Considering the multiple actors involved (Cavallone et al., 2021), we ask whose purposes hackathons serve. We analyse six hackathons run in a French business school since 2016 on sustainable development, with an in-depth focus on one event. Data include surveys from 260 students and 13 interviews with programme managers, stakeholders, and faculty.

Findings reveal tensions between stakeholder expectations and perceived value. Without adapting hackathons to academic aims, they risk failing to meet diverse needs. Our multi-stakeholder approach highlights these tensions and offers recommendations to “hack” the hackathon for educational value. More broadly, we contribute to sustainability competence development and propose adjustments to better align hackathons with educational goals.

2. BACKGROUND

To set our empirical study within the wider discussion on the nature and role of management education, we begin by highlighting the current debates around management education and practice, before analysing hackathons in greater detail.

2.1. The Gap Between Management Education and Reality in the Context of Grand Challenges

Business schools have faced criticism (Ferlie et al., 2010), particularly regarding a perceived disconnect between academic theory and practical business needs (Schoemaker, 2008). As companies are increasingly reluctant to provide on-the-job training (Puri, 2018), students must acquire practical skills. Responses include designing curriculums with professionals (Bruno et al., 2021) and promoting experiential learning to develop essential competencies (Dean et al., 2020). Another critique concerns business schools' ability to prepare ethical leaders, a discussion sparked by scandals like Enron (Beggs & Dean, 2007; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Nonet et al., 2016). The UN's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) were launched in 2007, coinciding with growing research on sustainability education (Starik et al., 2010). However, the impact of these efforts on practice remains uncertain a decade later (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Montiel et al., 2020b). The more recent appearance of “grand challenges” (e.g., poverty, climate change) has revitalized these debates. These complex problems (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Ferraro et al., 2015) require comprehensive, coordinated solutions (George et al., 2016). In 2022, the European Commission published the GreenComp framework (Bianchi et al., 2022), which promotes skills like systems thinking and collective action, and encourages active, experiential learning. While broad recommendations exist (Montiel et al., 2020a), there are limited empirical examples of how to effectively implement these methods. To address this gap, we explore the use of hackathons as an educational tool in this context.

2.2. Hackathons: A Practice-Based Tool

Blending “hack” and “marathon,” hackathons emerged about two decades ago (Macedo Guimarães et al., 2021) as an intensive event where computer developers created prototypes over short periods (Briscoe & Mulligan, 2014; Raatikainen et al., 2013). Once loosely structured, large corporations have since adopted hackathons as “accelerated innovation processes” (Lifshitz-Assaf et al., 2021, p. 684). Firms have expanded the model to include non-IT specialists and potential customers (Briscoe & Mulligan, 2014; Canopé, 2017; Aillerie, 2020). However, critics note that hackathons can lack inclusivity, produce quick fixes rather than genuine innovations, and blur boundaries between work and leisure (Endrissat, 2019). Ethical questions have been raised about unpaid labour and “forced” collaboration.

Hackathons have nonetheless been widely adopted in higher education as active learning formats for addressing real-world problems (Gréselle-Zaïbet et al., 2018; Silver et al., 2016; Suominen et al., 2018; Porras et al., 2019). This student-centred approach positions professors as facilitators (Greenwood Dictionary of Education, 2003; Canopé, 2017). Companies often sponsor these events, proposing challenges and offering prizes or internships (Page et al., 2016). The resulting “coopetition”—simultaneous collaboration and competition—is viewed as an effective way to foster innovation in university–industry partnerships (Suominen et al., 2018). Despite their appeal, hackathons demand substantial resources, suitable collaborative spaces, strong pedagogical design, and institutional support (Canopé, 2017; Page et al., 2016). Further research is needed to determine their long-term educational and organisational value.

2.3. Addressing Grand Challenges Through Hackathons

The real-world nature of hackathons has intuitively lent itself to the development of “green hackathons” (Zapico et al., 2013) which aim to provide answers to pressing social and environmental issues. Hackathons favour diversity and interdisciplinary expertise which is needed to respond to grand challenges (George et al., 2016) and offer an experiential pedagogical approach, which is complementary to more traditional theoretical contributions and act as devices for “learning by doing” and “doing it together” (Canopé 2017, p. 15). The teaching of sustainable development encourages the use of less top-down pedagogical methods and the confrontation of ideas and situational problem-solving. These methods bring not only meaningful learning, but also enhance skills’ anchoring, as developed through constructivism theories (Doychinova, 2023). Thus, as the demand for competences to address sustainability and grand challenges grows and the practice of educational hackathons becomes more widespread, we might expect a convergence giving rise to more educational hackathons on sustainability (Saukkonen et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the time constrained nature of hackathons may encourage quick fixes and short pitches and which destroy differences of opinion (Endrissat, 2019). The hackathon tool, which evolved in practice to offer a highly efficient innovation process (Lifshitz-Assaf et al., 2021), may not then be appropriate for the complexity inherent in grand challenges and sustainability issues (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016). Moreover, hackathons can easily be diverted from their original objectives, which were to find viable solutions for the community rather than for a handful of elected representatives or private actors.

Hackathons seem to hold the potential to be a relevant tool for teaching the skills required to address grand challenges. However, their objectives may vary significantly between different stakeholders: pedagogical objectives can differ while institutional, professional and student participants may all have quite different aims. Students may be stimulated by the final prize or more interested in the convivial aspect, the concrete character of the project or the contact with companies (Page et al., 2016). The companies themselves want new ideas, to understand the aspirations of the new generation, to improve their employer image, and to identify future recruits. The motivation to address grand challenges cannot be assumed to be the driving motive for all stakeholders.

2.4. Experiential and Self-Determined Learning: The Ambiguity of the Hackathon Format

Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) has long sought to bridge theory and practice through cycles of action and reflection, with hackathons in business schools exemplifying this approach by promoting engagement and practical competencies. Yet, when implemented

in overly instrumental or decontextualised ways, experiential learning can overlook the social, institutional, and power dynamics that shape learning processes (Beard & Wilson, 2018). These concerns are especially relevant to grand challenges, which demand engagement with complex socio-ecological systems and sufficient time for structured reflection beyond mere “doing” to critically examine assumptions and trade-offs (Kayes, 2002; Sutherland & Crowther, 2006).

In hackathons, students may also engage in *heutagogy* or self-determined learning (Blaschke, 2012; Kenyon & Hase, 2010), as they must work autonomously, mobilize their skills, and build their own solutions. While heutagogy is valued for preparing graduates for uncertain and evolving contexts (Moore, 2020), research identifies persistent challenges in higher education, including uneven learner autonomy, tensions with assessment systems, and the need for scaffolding to prevent inequities (Blaschke & Hase, 2016; Moore, 2020).

Educational hackathons thus sit at the intersection of experiential and self-directed learning, fostering autonomy and active participation. However, their accelerated, time-compressed format amplifies the limitations of these pedagogies by constraining opportunities for deep reflection, critical dialogue, and the development of the systemic, long-term thinking required to address grand challenges (Lifshitz-Assaf et al., 2021).

3. METHOD

To understand the effectiveness and purpose of educational hackathons in management education, particularly in the context of sustainable development, this study has been conducted in two steps.

At first, the researchers gathered preliminary information from five different hackathons they organised at a French business school since 2016 (see Table 1 for details). These hackathons focused on sustainability themes and involved a variety of stakeholders, including educators, students, programme managers and external partners. Common reflections indicated dissatisfaction with the achievement of educational goals, mainly due to institutional constraints and misaligned stakeholders’ expectations.

In a second step, these reflections and insights were then further explored through an in-depth study conducted on the Critical Marketing Hackathon (Table 1) at the same institution. Part of a Master’s Marketing Major, this hackathon was held twice yearly. Over two days, student teams developed innovative marketing proposals addressing environmental and social issues related to packaging and waste. This hackathon capped a module on SDGs, stakeholder engagement, and carbon footprint assessment. Three external experts—from business, the public sector, and an NGO—participated as consultants and provided feedback during final pitches.

Table 1.
Summary presentation of the hackathons studied.

Name	General Theme	Methodology	Participants	Ext* Part	Organising Team	Dur *	Rec*
LSP® Workshop	Defining growth through cross-functional approaches (management, technology, construction and urban planning)	Workshops based on the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® methodology	40 postgraduate students (management, engineering and architecture schools)	No	1 lecturer specialised in economics; 1 instructional designer specialised in CSR	2 days	None
Urban Lab	Addressing global challenges related to the city of tomorrow	Design thinking methodology	110 Master's level (M2) students (management, engineering and architecture)	Yes	5 programme coordinators; 1 institutional representative ; 1 instructional designer	3 days	Since 2016
CSR Challenge	Working on a CSR issue linked to one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Ideation process combining phases of divergence and convergence	120 to 156 students enrolled in specialised Master's programmes in management	Yes	1 lecturer specialised in CSR; 1 instructional designer specialised in CSR	2 days	Annual since 2017
Plastic Forum	Understanding major environmental challenges and related CSR strategies	Role-playing activities, short lectures, discussions and team work	105 to 130 students from the International Master in Management	No	2 lecturers specialised in CSR	1.5 day	Annual since 2017
LID	Prototyping a collective urban henhouse	Learning-by-doing approach with immersion in a fablab	30 undergraduate students (management, engineering and architecture)	Yes	2 lecturers specialised in maker culture and design; partnership with a fablab	2 days	Not renewed for this theme
Critical Marketing Hackathon	Redesigning product market positioning to integrate environmental and social issues	Role-playing, expert talks, short lectures and team work	73 Master's level students majoring in marketing	No	4 lecturers; 1 instructional designer	2 days	Twice yearly since 2020

**Ext.Part: External Partner; Dur: Duration ; Rec: Recurrence*

Data was collected via student surveys, before and after the event, (260 responses), which included open and closed questions about their expectations, perceptions of the hackathon's relevance, and its value as a teaching tool. Additionally, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators, program directors, and external stakeholders. Interviews, lasting 17 to 62 minutes, were transcribed and thematically analysed using Nvivo software, with a final list of 16 themes agreed upon by the authors.

4. RESULTS

The benefits of the hackathon were recognised by students, experts, and school management. However, its specific format also generated some frustration. For teachers and managers, another major problem was highlighted: logistical tasks. The hackathon's organisation required a lot of time and energy, which also created some frustration among teachers, who felt they had less time to devote to instructional design.

4.1. Benefits of the Hackathon

Hackathons introduced something new to the curriculum, offering students a practical way to engage with critical marketing. Students said they were *"Pleasantly surprised; two very well organised days."* (Student G), that the hackathon was *"a playful way of discovering a teamwork topic"* (Student H), and *"I learned a lot and found the format very interesting."* (Student A). The format was seen as concrete, immersive and stimulating, giving *"a better understanding of the role and place of marketing in the integration of social and environmental issues"* (Student D). It also encouraged perspective-taking: *"It was very interesting to put ourselves in the place of the different stakeholders [...] and why the solutions are not so simple."* (Student B).

Experts agreed it raised awareness of sustainability: *"I think it is a good challenge [...] going forward it should be the job of a marketer to learn sustainable products. [...] This format is a very good exercise, because they have to adapt [...] with people that have different points of view, different perspectives, different objectives."* (NGO).

For directors, the main goal was to test innovative teaching and foster interdisciplinarity: *"It's difficult to get disciplines to talk to each other [...] when you look at the environment, you look at it from the point of view of strategy, marketing and so on."* (DIR 2). Another benefit was shared learning across backgrounds: *"So the idea [of hackathons] is really to have a time when all the students could get together and share a common learning experience."* (DIR 3). Hackathons also enabled teachers to innovate: *"So that teachers can [...] explore new subjects. I'd also say open up the teachers' chakras."* (DIR 3).

Educators highlighted fruitful collaboration across expertise: *"It's interesting: there's a bit of a skills transfer between us. [...] We support each other well, there's a good chemistry."* (Prof 2). However, participants' experiences also exposed notable points of frustration.

4.2. Frustrations Linked to the Hackathon Format

Students felt that the hackathon format was inappropriate for developing new solutions. Many of them would have liked to continue the project and engage more extensively with stakeholders and companies: *"It was exciting, and it would be great to continue, by trying to explore our ideas in more depth and contacting the right stakeholders who could be involved in the project."* (Student F). The students found the experience very demanding and intense; this was exacerbated by its programming just before the final exam period of the semester. *"I found this experience tiring, short and uninteresting. I can explain: working from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. is not the problem, the problem is rather having precise and consistent expectations in a short space of time and not having to take a break (one 50-minute session in the afternoon)."* (Student J) and suggested to *"Leave 1 hour more for producing the poster, because that's what we'll be graded on."* (Student K). Other comments indicated the event had been too long suggesting: *"Slightly less time, segment the work into even more precise points"*. (Student L).

The graded output of the hackathon was a poster expected at the end day two which created a certain amount of stress for some students. *"I was very stressed on the first day, partly because the event took place within 2 days of the finals, partly because, apart from the academic aspect of the Hackathon, it represented 50% of the score for 4 credits [...]."* (Student N).

However, the teaching team recognised that this could be taken further. Students remained at the ideation stage and were unable to move on to prototyping: *"The problem was that the [...] format prevented us from going as far as we wanted. Today, it's about ideation, not prototyping."* (Prof 3).

Experts regret not having enough time to discuss matters with all the different teams and to give them feedback. *"If I [...] had more time, I could have maybe given a debrief to all the groups or even when the groups are brainstorming, I could potentially challenge them to push them further. I could try to do if there would be some time for that [...]."* (NGO)

4.3. No Common Objective Shared by the Different Stakeholders

One of the organisers' regrets was being too focused on the hackathon process, to the detriment of the content even though this point underlines how educators behave to ensure a student-centred approach as recommended in the field of constructivism. Students build their own knowledge through experience. *"On this hackathon, I worked a lot with [Prof 1] on the way the hackathon was going to be run, we worked a lot on the way we wanted the activities to be carried out, on the proposed missions we could carry out and the objectives. [...] But I think we could go further... [...] so that students can test their solutions in the field. A bit more than that. Because, in the end, they're ideas but they're a bit out of touch with the ground."* (ING) But by doing so, the hackathon seemed too structured for the person from the company, who considered that it doesn't allow highly original proposals to emerge. When comparing the Critical Marketing Hackathon to another hackathon he had attended in a different business school he noted: *"I believe yours is more framed. So I mean it is very squared, the students are quite consistent in the mission and the global level is homogeneous so from year to year I think [there is] good work and relevant insights because the angle is quite narrow.... in [the other school] the angle is not narrow enough [...] but at the end some of the projects are really useful, really insightful and they help to have a new perspective on my mission, even if 80 % of the products, it's fantasy [...]"* (Company)

In conclusion, the hackathon was well received by the students and the objective of raising awareness of sustainability in marketing was largely achieved. The inclusion of different stakeholder views was particularly appreciated. However, some aspects didn't seem to work so well, such as the expected outcomes, and there were disagreements about logistical aspects (limited timetable, advice given to students). Some students' experience of 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' might have been frustrating. The processes are not the same and the sustainability hackathon focuses more on procedural knowledge. Another problem was that in contrast to the original hackathons, the educational hackathons observed were highly structured. In fact, some students had not yet sufficiently acquired the skills of autonomy. In order to manage a variety of demands and challenges, the educators had to adapt the hackathon. Hacking the hackathon in this way created a lot of work for them, and in the end meant that the format no longer precisely fitted the definition of a hackathon.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that hackathons create value for different categories of stakeholders and therefore could form part of a forward-looking business school strategy of co-creation with stakeholders (Cavallone et al., 2021; Thomas & Ambrosini, 2021). However, to ensure that this practice-based tool can be used effectively as an educational tool in the context of grand challenges, some critical points should be considered.

5.1. Hacking the Hackathon: From Accelerated Innovation to Critical Experiential Learning

Our empirical results suggest that the diverse types of value generated by hackathons must be carefully balanced, as they differ from traditional teaching formats. Their visible event status can add value for programme managers, students, and external experts, but this must not compromise pedagogical integrity. A key aspect in using hackathons as pedagogical tools is to align objectives and expected outputs. Hackathons as practice-based tools focus on “answers” (Zapico et al., 2013), “innovative quick fixes” (Komssi et al., 2015; Macedo Guimarães et al 2021; Page et al., 2016) or “fast-paced innovative solutions” (Komssi et al., 2015; Macedo Guimarães et al., 2021; Page et al., 2016). However, our findings indicate that in the context of grand challenges, hackathons are more effective at creating awareness of complexity and fostering dialogue among diverse perspectives than at producing innovative solutions. Thus, evaluation design becomes critical: emphasizing final outputs within a short timeframe risk reducing complexity and undermining learning objectives. The focus on a final pitch or poster tends to push students toward simplified, incremental ideas and consensus over contestation, limiting their potential for transformative impact (Endrissat, 2019).

How hackathons are embedded within the wider curriculum matters too. Beyond logistical considerations, connecting them to pre- and post-event courses enhances pedagogical value, drawing on prior knowledge and extending learning toward action, innovation, and scenario-building. This integration could also reconcile external experts’ preference for company-specific outcomes with educators’ aim for broader applicability through subsequent critical analysis in other contexts.

Finally, the positioning of hackathons within programmes matters for skills development. While they support more self-directed or self-determined learning (Blaschke, 2012), such autonomy is most effective when scaffolded through earlier learning experiences. Educators therefore need familiarity with heutagogical principles and an awareness of students’ varying needs for guidance (Kenyon & Hase, 2010).

In conclusion, our findings call for caution and a clear pedagogical roadmap to ensure that hackathons retain educational integrity while preserving their appeal. This is especially relevant given the growing emphasis on multi-stakeholder sustainability education, the development of “green” competences in future leaders, and the rising popularity of hackathons in higher education.

5.2. A Conceptual Framework for Adapting Hackathons to Management Education

We propose a conceptual framework for using hackathons as pedagogical tools in management education that aligns with the long-term, systemic nature of grand challenges. The framework combines two perspectives—experiential-critical learning and

self-determined (heutagogical) learning—across three phases: before, during, and after the hackathon.

In the pre-event phase, emphasis is placed on preparing students and stakeholders by embedding the hackathon within a broader sustainability curriculum, providing tools for systems thinking and stakeholder analysis, and explicitly addressing the limits of accelerated innovation formats.

During the event, the framework advocates slowing down elements of the process to preserve pedagogical integrity. This involves creating structured opportunities for reflection and contestation, encouraging teams to engage with tensions and trade-offs rather than premature consensus, and valuing process outputs (e.g. stakeholder maps or scenarios) alongside solution pitches.

In the post-event phase, the hackathon serves as a springboard rather than an endpoint. Follow-up courses and projects extend selected ideas, critically examine implementation conditions, and revisit the hackathon itself as an object of analysis. This approach supports the development of sustainability-related competences—such as systems thinking, anticipatory and collaborative skills—while mitigating risks of superficial engagement.

Future research should further explore ethical and inclusion issues in pedagogical hackathons, particularly regarding workload intensity, accessibility, and value capture, to ensure coherence with sustainability values.

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