

SUPPORTING CREATIVE AND BUSINESS-ORIENTED CRITICAL THINKING IN CLIENT-BASED PROJECTS

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Abstract

Client-based projects are valuable tool for marketing educators in many ways. They bring realism to the class room and enhance active, experiential learning (de los Santos & Jensen, 1985; Gremler et al., 2000; Razzouk, Seitz & Rizkallah, 2003). Indeed, it is argued that the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills to actual needs of a client provides a rich hands-on experience for the students (Ardley & Taylor, 2010).

The process of extensive client-based projects is often messy as some information is available multiple places, it is difficult to determine what information is valid, reliable and useful for the project, or some important aspect of information is missing. This ambiguity teaches the students to make decisions under uncertainty and helps students to solve complex and unstructured problems (Kennedy, Lawton & Walker, 2001).

Students can produce the final outcome in different ways. Some of them are active independent actors while others need a great deal of support. Lopez & Lee (2005) provide advice for managing client-based projects and emphasize advance planning and periodic and productive feedback. However, when the client-based projects are used in challenging contexts, such as very early phases of service or product development, the fuzzy front end, there is a need to combine creative and business-oriented critical thinking. Indeed, from the course management point of view, it is critical to understand how to protect diversity and creativity within the client-based projects and at the same time ensure the proper outcome – that is, to reach the expected goal at the required level. Thus, *the aim of this study is to increase our understanding on how to support creative and business-oriented critical thinking in client-based marketing projects.* The study proceeds as follows. First, the context of the study, the client-based marketing course is described. Second, the typical project paths that the students undertake are identified and analyzed. Third, the critical phases and challenges within the paths are identified, and finally, suggestions are made on how to overcome the challenges and support the learning processes with desired outcome.

Description of the Context and Data

This study is part of an action research project that focused on experiential learning in marketing curriculum. The case course is a master's level marketing course called Concept Factory. It is a practical client-based marketing course where students work in teams to tackle different kinds of marketing problems. The pedagogical basis for the Concept Factory is experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). The pedagogy emphasizes the students' role as active learners and their responsibility for their own learning. The students' theoretical background knowledge is linked to its real-life application. The teacher's role is consultative, and the teaching and learning activities have been designed to support and facilitate the process of completing the assignment. The content and structure of the case course has been developed through action research project during 2007-2013. The assessment is based on Solo taxonomy and focuses not only on the outcome but also the process on how the outcome is reached (Biggs & Collins, 1982; Jaskari 2013). The data for the analysis consists of 51 group assignments involving real-life clients, 122 individual learning diaries and teacher's reflections on the processes from eight case courses.

Seven Typical Project Paths

Seven typical process paths can be identified. The processes differ from each other in terms of students' approach to learning (Entwistle, 2001), the intended level of understanding visible in their project outcome (Biggs & Collins, 1982), students' will of gaining ownership over the projects and enthusiasm of making an effort to challenge themselves. (1) *Runaway* refers to a path that never really starts as the unmotivated students refuse to take responsibility for the project work. (2) The *Undemanding* path is a case where the problem setting is too easy and does not require enough creative or critical thinking. (3) The *Quick & Dirty* path is plain and straightforward. (4) *Guided Tour* refers to a path where the students are active and take responsibility for their work. (5) *Great Adventure* refers to a path where active, motivated students are willing to make an effort and try hard to develop their own thinking and application skills. (6) *Mission Almost Impossible* refers to a path where the students are eager to try new things. (7) *Never Ending Story* refers to a path where the students may engage in a creative process, but face so many difficulties on the way that they are not capable of reaching a common final solution in the end.

From the teaching management point of view, the *Runaway* path is the most problematic. The students are not motivated enough to work in these kinds of projects that require motivation and commitment. The *Undemanding* path occurs most often when the students work with the client by themselves. Thus it is suggested that even independent client-based project work should be negotiated with the teacher or that the teacher should provide guidelines on how to develop project objectives. *Runaway* and *Quick & Dirty* illustrate how difficult it can be for the students to really engage in creative processes. The students do not want to push themselves out of their comfort zone, or they see the creative methods and techniques as naïve, useless or a waste of their time. The *Runaway* path ends before it has started, while the *Quick & Dirty* path emphasizes goal-orientation with a lack of open-mindedness. To help them think in broad terms, it is suggested that the use of creative tools in different phases should be a requirement.

Guided Tour and *Great Adventure* are examples of successful project paths. The students within a *Guided Tour* are excited and motivated but lack the self-confidence to trust their own thinking and to produce their own solutions. They find it very difficult to understand that there is not just one correct answer to the problem. These students need support to trust their own thinking and self-confidence. *Great Adventure* is a showpiece path. The students are able to combine creativity and business-oriented critical thinking in such a way that they produce innovative, business-oriented holistic outcomes. The students are self-steering and eager to find the solutions on their own. In the process paths *Mission Almost Impossible* and *Never Ending Story*, students are full of enthusiasm and creativity. However, their projects lack goal-orientation, decision making and business-oriented critical thinking. *Mission Almost Impossible* can lead to the achievement of course goals, while *Never Ending Story* lacks a coherent outcome. This is also problematic as the students have put a lot of time and effort into their work and they think it is worth many credits and a high grade. However, if they have not achieved a coherent whole, they cannot be given a high grade.

It is proposed that the teacher needs to balance two competing and complementary guiding processes. The first is a facilitating process, where the teacher aims at enhancing unconstrained, imaginative and visionary thinking. It means that the teacher enhances the creative environment, fosters cognitive flexibility and supports working in an area of uncertainty. The process helps the students to think out of the box, to let go and to bear uncertainty (Titus, 2000; Titus, 2007). This is difficult for the students and needs to be facilitated by means such as creating a trusting atmosphere, bringing in creative tools and pushing the students to think from different angles. As Titus (2007) notes, one of the biggest challenges for educators is to

motivate the students to tackle challenging creative problems that require a lot of time, effort and energy.

The second is a coaching process, where the teacher aims at enhancing critical, business-oriented thinking. The coaching process refers to a business-oriented problem-solving process that helps the students to reach the goal and produce solutions that are both valued by the market and profitable. This process emphasizes, for example, earlier knowledge, goal orientation, effectiveness, useful solutions, keeping to timetables, and documenting what has been done.

The students may not necessarily follow only one project path. During the project time the students may switch from one path to another. Indeed, the teacher needs to identify what project path the students are heading down and direct the supporting facilitating and coaching processes accordingly in order to enable a creative and critical outcome.

It is proposed that the project outcome can be ensured by phasing the project in a way that allows creativity but focuses on decision-making points. This gives structure and security for the students, and allows creative thinking, trial and error processes and even excesses without losing focus. The backbone of the structure is the business development process. This gives structure for goal oriented working and business-oriented critical thinking. Each phase of the chosen business process includes divergent and convergent aspects of creative process. The divergent phases open up new possibilities whereas the convergent phase pushes the students to make decisions. Thus creativity is enforced in each phase and the students are pushed more to their limits to bring up fresh ideas.

Student output refers to decision making points and reflection on learning. The student output in the decision making points can be in a form of presentation, essay, poster or some other kind of tool that comprises the students' thinking. Feedback for this output from teachers, peers, client or professional partners allows the students to rethink their thinking and in case needed, adjust their view. This allows the iteration to occur.

Conclusions

This study has focused on understanding the different ways that the student groups tackle their way through client-based projects. It is emphasized that students may take different paths in order to reach the goal and this versatility should be valued by the teacher. However, as there is clear need to get the job done in a certain time frame, it is proposed phase the project using business process and creative process as a tool. This then leaves freedom for the students to carry out creative tasks without losing the focus on the goal. The teacher can use facilitation process to foster creativity and coaching process to foster business-oriented critical thinking.

References Available upon Request