

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EFFICACY OF MARKETING AND HR LIVE CASES

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ABSTRACT

Live cases involve an organization coming to a college class to have students complete a real-life project for the organization. This paper analyzes student perceptions of their live case experiences partially based on andragogy theory. Based on a sample of 214 students from two universities, live cases in marketing and human resource management had ratings above 3.5 on a 1-5 scale based on general benefits gained and skill and career enhancements. Students perceived live cases as more valuable than case studies, and simulations. Live cases seem to have little perceived impact on career enhancement.

INTRODUCTION

Live cases, otherwise known as client-based projects, involve college students working with a real client to provide a product or service for that client. The client visits with the students in class. Students also may visit or electronically communicate with the client throughout the project. Students complete activities appropriate for the subject matter for the class. Class subject matters may include marketing, human resource management, finance, accounting, supply chain management, and other scholarly areas. Activities may include creating marketing plans, employee handbooks, business plans, pay structures, transportation schedules, and others.

Client-based projects are associated with the mission of two business colleges in the Western United States that are part of this study. Both business college missions suggest that their students should have real-world experiences. Client-based projects, by definition, can help provide such experiences. Theoretically, these experiences should lead to improved skills and career preparation for the students.

Based on the experiences with these two business colleges, this paper seeks to expand the database of research on client-based projects by analyzing how students perceive the skills gained and career enhancements associated with these projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strengths of Live Cases

These cases appear to correspond to the characteristics of andragogy theory that involves how adults learn best. Knowles (1984) described several aspects of this theory. First, adults prefer to learn from experiences generated from real life events. A second aspect of andragogy theory is that adults want to apply their learning. A third aspect of andragogy theory is that adults learn more effectively through participative techniques. Students participate by asking clients questions in order to generate appropriate reports. According to Kaupins (1997, 2002), live cases had the highest overall participation ratings based on a survey of 200 business managers. These managers rated 20 training methods such as lectures, simulations, television and role plays based on measures of training effectiveness such as knowledge acquisition, participation, and problem solving.

Weaknesses of Live Cases

According to Kaupins (1998), live case projects can be very difficult for students. Clients might ask for a considerable amount of time on the project. Clients might not cooperate by answering e-mails or phone calls. Students might not have the skill sets to complete especially complicated projects.

The professor might have a difficult time to set up live cases. Finding clients, preparing assignments, and grading could be difficult because the professor does not have complete control over the clients like they would a textbook case study. There is potential liability when students reveal confidential information about the client inappropriately (McCain & Lincoln, 1982).

Clients might not get the quality that they desired from the students. Lack of quality might be the result of poor student work or the client's inability to answer all of the students' questions. In the middle of the semester, the client might be acquired or severely downsized – rendering projects in the beginning of a semester useless (Kaupins, 1998).

What's Missing in the Literature

A detailed analysis of what students think about live cases in terms of their experiences during the live case projects, skills enhanced, career development, and comparisons to other training methods is lacking in the literature. While many articles exist in the literature about client-based projects, few go beyond a simple "how to" approach with little analysis of the purported benefits such activities are supposed to provide. The rare exceptions do exist albeit, usually limited in scope.

Kaupins' (1997, 1998, 2002) research states how corporate trainers and management professors perceive live case projects relative to other training methods in terms of knowledge acquisition and other measures. These other measures do not include experiences during the training, skills enhanced, and career development.

PURPOSE

To add to the live case literature, this paper analyzes student opinions of live case projects. The focus is on advantages of such projects in terms of how the projects compared to other training methods, skills gained, career management enhancements, and knowledge gained in the relevant courses involved.

METHODOLOGY

Survey data were obtained from four classes in three higher education institutions in the Western United States and taught by the two coauthors of this paper. Table 1 shows how the coauthors, schools, classes, and projects were arranged.

There were two different live case projects – the marketing plan and the employee handbook. Both projects involved groups of three to five students who work the entire semester to complete a written report (marketing plan or employee handbook). In-class and out-of-class time was used. Both types of written reports help students cover many of the areas covered in the respective classes. Both classes had students meet with the client several times in the semester and then provide a final report to the professor and the client. The report ranged from 50 to 200 pages. Clients were small businesses or nonprofits. Each class of 20 to 60 students involved three to eight clients.

The marketing plan project had students find the client, meet with the client at his/her workplace, and provide an hour long oral presentation with or

without the client in the classroom. The marketing plan helped provide the client with market research and set the direction for the client's marketing efforts.

In contrast, the employee handbook project allowed students to find a client or have one selected for them from the professor. Student groups met with the client in the classroom twice in the semester. The final handbook is turned in to the professor and the client received the original handbook with the professor's comments about the handbook. The employee handbook covered the mission, selection, discipline, work rules, compensation, benefits, security, training, safety, and other human resource issues of the organization.

Two hundred and fourteen undergraduate marketing, marketing research, and human resource management students completed a two page survey about the benefits of their live case project right after their project was completed. Questions were organized into basic categories: benefits, skills applied/developed, career preparation, and marketing or human resource management content to gather data about the quality of their experiences. Many of the skills listed in the survey come from Floyd and Gordon's (1998) marketing skills research and Kaupins' (2000) list of what is typical in a human resource handbook. A Likert scale was used with anchors ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Demographic data about the students also were gathered. Open-ended questions were provided to allow students to elaborate on their experiences. The only difference in the marketing and human resource management surveys is a section covering class specific content.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Concerning demographic information, 214 student respondents answered the survey. About 60 percent of the students took marketing and 40 percent took human resource management. Half took the course in 2008. About 39 percent were marketing majors and 36 percent were general business or management majors. About 52 percent were female and 75 percent were white/non Hispanic.

Table 1 shows descriptive results general benefits, skills developed and applied, and career preparation associated with class involvement with live case projects. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the highest rating was "The assignment was a valuable learning experience" with a 4.40 rating. The lowest score was "I have set

career goals as a result of completing this project” at 3.31.

**TABLE 1
GENERAL BENEFITS OF LIVE CASES**

Valuable learning experience	4.40
Gained skill sets by working with a real client	4.37
Assignment is effective means of learning strategy	4.36
Learned strategy better than by reading the text	4.34
Recommend for other semesters	4.27
More valuable than completing a case study	4.19
More valuable than completing a simulation	4.12
More confident in knowledge	4.11
Project management skills	4.11
Teamwork skills	4.10
Can describe skills gained to an employer	4.10
More valuable than completing a community based learning assignment	4.07
Will be proud to show to potential employer	4.04
Makes me more marketable managing clients	3.99
Good example of my skill sets	3.98
Leadership skills	3.98
Critical thinking skills	3.94
Communication skills	3.90
Required greater effort than other semester projects	3.88
Information technology skills	3.85
Enjoyed completing the assignment	3.84
Conflict resolution skills	3.76
Presentation skills	3.66
Will have influence on career choice	3.55
Learned a lot about myself	3.49
Thought about career goals earlier than normal	3.42
Set career goals	3.31

The general items involving how much was learned and how live case projects compared to other training methods tended to be ranked higher than all other items. The lowest ranked items tended to be career-related. In other words, the students seemed to like the client-based project method but the impact on their future careers seemed somewhat limited.

The scale from Table 1 had an overall Cronbach Alpha reliability of .95. This indicates that the scale of 29 items has overall consistency.

The nonparametric Mann-Whitney test was used to compare the means of the four classes across the survey items from Table 1. The means of the individual classes are not shown due to space limitations. Based on a nonparametric Mann-Whitney test to compare the means of the four classes across the survey items shown in Table 1, there were few significant differences between the means of the marketing courses. However, there were many significant differences in the scores between the marketing classes (BA421, BA423, MKT3010) and the human resource management class (HRM305). The human resource management class had significantly lower scores across most of the survey items shown in Table 1.

One possible explanation for the lower scores in the human resource management class comes from the essay portion of the survey. Three groups of five students had difficulties communicating with their clients. Their clients simply did not return their e-mails and phone calls. As a result, the students complained that much of their work came from one two hour meeting with the client (client missed a second scheduled meeting). Students from these three groups provided a one point lower average in their ratings across the survey items shown in Table 1.

Table 2 shows the most significant outcomes of the employee handbook projects relative to major areas within human resource management. According to the student survey, the most impacts were associated with knowledge of “human resource planning”, “training and development”, and “health”. All of these were ranked first due to rounding to the nearest hundredths. The survey items in last place were business strategy and selection. The last place items make sense because corporate strategy and selection were not dealt with in detail on the handbook.

**TABLE 2
BENEFITS SPECIFIC TO HR LIVE CASES**

Outcomes Unique to HR Cases	
Business Strategy	3.81
Selection	3.81
Human Resource Planning	4.13
Recruiting	3.87
Compensation	3.93
Benefits	4.03
Training and Development	4.13
Health	4.13
International Relations	3.97
Performance Appraisal	4.07
Discipline	4.07

HRIS	4.02
Relationships	4.00
Ethical Issues	3.87

Table 3 shows the most significant outcomes of the marketing plan projects relative to major areas within marketing. According to the student survey, the most impacts were associated with “research design” and the least with “appropriate research methods.” All of the marketing ratings had scores within .25 of each other and had similar standard deviations. One possible interpretation is that the scores reflect the comprehensive nature of the marketing project. Students perceived gains in all major marketing areas. Another interpretation is that the students could have just marked the same high answer because such questions were listed in the back of the survey together.

**TABLE 3
BENEFITS SPECIFIC TO MARKETING
LIVE CASES**

Market Research Process	4.49
Problem Statements	4.32
Secondary Data	4.29
Questionnaire Design	4.53
Survey Sample	4.44
Research Report	4.33
Study Design	4.46
Appropriate Research Methods	4.28
Role of Marketing Research	4.44

**FURTHER RESEARCH AND STUDY
LIMITATIONS**

The present study went into detail concerning possible advantages of live cases in terms of experiences during the project, skills gained, career management, and comparisons with other methods. Future research should also look at possible disadvantages of these projects. A hint of disadvantages come from the present survey through the essay portion. Leading essay comments include uncooperative clients, trivial/redundant work, problems with group coordination, and lack of clear direction in the projects. Other problems, from the professor’s perspective include the time to find clients and adapt in case a client withdraws from the project in the middle of the semester (Kaupins, 2000).

Demographic data can be analyzed in more detail. Specifically, what is the impact of prior experience with client-based projects and work in general on ratings of client-based projects. Impacts of other demographic variables on client-based project ratings such as ethnicity, gender, year in school, graduate level status and major can be investigated.

The present study investigated marketing and human resource management cases. Future research can also check how other areas of business such as accountancy, finance, marketing, supply chain management, information systems, economics, and entrepreneurship are associated with ratings of the projects.

There are many live case project options within each major business area. For example, within human resource management, students can write employee handbooks, volunteer handbooks, pay structures, training manuals, and orientation checklists.

Even within projects there could be significant variations in project design. Clients could be obtained by students or from Small Business Development Centers, university clearinghouses, former students, local newspapers, advertisements on the Web, and word-of-mouth. Students could work in groups or as individuals. One client can be used for an entire class. That class could capture different aspects of that client’s needs. Multiple clients could be used in a class so each group or individual would work on a totally different project. Client communications can be long and intense or short and general. The projects could be short one page summaries or two hundred page monographs.

CONCLUSION

The present study showed that both marketing and human resource management case studies provide significant advantages according to students who have completed them. Among the leading advantages including enhanced learning of strategy, project management skills, confidence in knowledge, ability to describe skills gained to an employer, marketability, and improved leadership skills. Career management questions associated with how students perceived the project as enhancing or changing their careers seemed to have the lowest ratings.

References Available on Request