INVESTIGATING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CLIENT-SPONSORED PROJECTS IN MARKETING MANAGEMENT: THE DILEMMA OF (NOT) PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH TEMPLATES

Sven Tuzovic, School of Business, Pacific Lutheran University,
12180 S Park Ave, Tacoma, WA 98447; stuzovic@plu.edu

Merl Simpson, School of Business, Pacific Lutheran University,
12180 S Park Ave, Tacoma, WA 98447; merlins@seanet.com

Jörg Finsterwalder, College of Business and Economics, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, 8041, New Zealand, joerg.finsterwalder@canterbury.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

In teaching and learning, instructors are often faced with finding 'real world' applications to enrich their teaching to facilitate a more practice-related learning experience. This paper outlines student perceptions of a semester-long group project in two Marketing Management courses. 22 MBA and 32 under-graduate students participated in client-sponsored marketing projects in groups of four to five individuals. The paper discusses students' learning experiences and the instructor's dilemma of providing students with a marketing plan template (directive style) vs. *not* giving students any directions for developing a marketing plan (laissez-faire style). Potential improvements for the next iteration are presented.

CLIENT-SPONSORED PROJECTS IN MARKETING EDUCATION

Educators are faced with the challenge of preparing students "to be productive employees who can communicate effectively, work well in teams and (…) demonstrate content knowledge" (Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2009: 154). In the past, academics have been accused of emphasizing marketing theory instead of bridging the gap between theoretical marketing principles and 'real-world' practice (de los Santos and Jensen, 1985). As a result, several scholars have criticized that students were ill prepared for a career in the marketing profession (Day, 1979; Ostheimer, 1977; Peters, 1980). Others point out that "(…) the lecture format is not the most effective educational delivery mechanism, particularly in marketing" (Helms, Mayo and Baxter, 2003: 18). Instead, active learning methods in which students are empowered to think and learn for themselves are recommended as an alternative (Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 1991). Literature on education and learning advocates in particular experiential learning (e.g. Gremler et al., 2000; Navarro, 2008; Rosso et al., 2009) which refers to an interactive teaching style with new roles for teacher and students (Simpson and Pham, 2007). The task of the instructor is to design an environment in which students actively participate in the learning process (Bobbitt et al., 2000). Forms of experiential learning include 'real world' course projects, field trips, case studies, simulations, business audits and community-based service learning (Andrews, 2007; Govekar and Rishi, 2007; Gremler et al., 2000).

Several authors have suggested that rather than traditional case studies client-sponsored projects are a more robust way of meeting the needs of academia and practice (Bove and Davies, 2009; Humphreys, 1981; Lopez and Lee, 2005; Ramocki, 1987). Client-sponsored projects are also sometimes referred to as live cases (Burns, 1990; LeClair and Stöttinger, 1999). These projects require an organization to sponsor or commission a group of students to complete a given marketing project (Bove and Davies, 2009). Client organizations can include small or large companies that are either a for-profit or a nonprofit business, and the level of involvement and student contact can vary depending on the individual company (Clark and Whitelegg, 1998; Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2009; Swan and Hansen, 1996). From an educational perspective, client-sponsored projects provide a number of benefits. Existing literature shows that this approach helps students to develop the skills that they need for their future jobs (Cooke and Williams, 2004). For instance, McEachern (2001: 211) argues that "client projects challenge students in ways that not even the best-written case study or end-of-the-textbook chapter exercise can duplicate." Other learning outcomes that have been identified relate to improvements of communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving skills (Cooke and Williams, 2004; Gremler et al., 2000; Scribner, Baker and Howe, 2003). Table 1 in the appendix summarizes key research findings in the

literature regarding the benefits of the client-based learning approach.

However, some scholars point out weaknesses in the course of experiential learning activities such as less guided instruction or undesirable student behaviors, e.g., free-riding in groups (Schibrowsky and Peltier, 1995). Other studies have shown that students (in particular undergraduate students) may feel overwhelmed by the ambiguity of client-sponsored projects (Kennedy, Lawton and Walker, 2001) and how time-consuming these projects can be (de los Santos and Jensen, 1985). Students may also become frustrated if clients are not responsive enough (Kennedy, Lawton and Walker, 2001), e.g. providing information in a timely manner. In addition, they may experience frustration if the instructor does not provide useful and timely feedback.

Faculty, on the other hand, are challenged with a number of tasks in the process of implementing group projects in their class. These include, for example, screening potential clients for reliability and appropriateness as well as managing both client and student expectations throughout the course of the project (Lopez and Lee, 2005). Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2009: 155) argue that due to the potential frustrations for students and the additional costs and efforts for faculty "there is a need to investigate whether students perceive any extra value from doing a client-based project (…)." Some studies show that student satisfaction is higher for live cases with regard to project, course and instructor evaluation (Dommeyer, 1986; Hafer, 1984). Yet, Bove and Davies (2009) criticize that empirical studies such as these are rare. While these authors support the use of client-sponsored projects, they also point out that careful planning is critical and that the projects need to be workable.

The objective of the present paper is to explore four "drivers" of overall student satisfaction with client-sponsored projects: (1) students' self-evaluation and satisfaction of their own work, (2) satisfaction with the work of their team members, (3) satisfaction with the client and (4) satisfaction with the instructor. Based on feedback from previous courses the instructor was also interested in shedding more light on the issue of whether to offer students a template for the final report. Normally, client-sponsored projects involve a final report that is submitted to the instructor as well as the client upon completion (Bove and Davies, 2009). Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2009) describe students in their courses using a similar template (introduction, SWOT analysis, marketing/advertising/research plan,

evaluations and conclusions). The context of the authors' study, however, involves undergraduate students in the courses Marketing Foundations, Marketing Research, and Advertising and Promotion (Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2009). Lincoln and Frontczak (2008) develop a marketing plan assignment for undergraduate students enrolled in Principles of Marketing who were guided systematically by having to deliver three components (situational analysis; segmentation and positioning; marketing mix, budget, calendar, and proforma income statement). Yet, the question arises how the structure of a final report will vary for client-sponsored projects conducted on the graduate level vs. the undergraduate level, i.e., in the case of MBA students who have to develop customized marketing solutions for their client. Based on the instructor's previous experience, MBA students enrolled in the course Marketing Management commonly have asked to use a template for their final marketing report. The instructor's perspective, however, has (always) been not to provide a common marketing plan template, since the content of each client-sponsored project varies significantly. For instance, individual team projects dealt with rebranding strategies, international market entry strategies, sponsoring strategies, online marketing strategies, etc. Thus, offering students a textbook template seems to misguide them to develop a report that addresses the client-specific marketing problems. However, the reality is that students' overall satisfaction with client-sponsored projects has been found to be influenced by the issue of having or not having a template at hand. The present research thus assumes that the issue of having a template would influence students' satisfaction with the team project. Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual framework that guided the present research.

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Framework
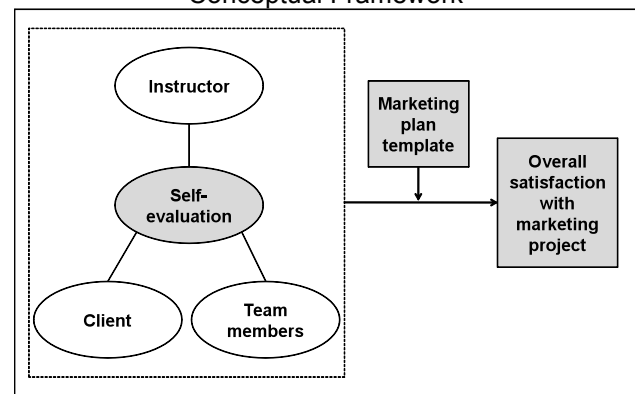
MARKETING PLAN TEMPLATES IN MARKETING MANAGEMENT TEXTBOOKS

The marketing management course (both undergraduate and graduate) focuses on formulating and implementing marketing management strategies and policies. The primary goal is to ensure that students have a solid foundation of the fundamental marketing decision-making tools and management of all elements of the marketing plan. A core learning element usually deals with the development of a marketing plan. Interestingly, a close look at the marketing management textbooks reveals how marketing plans are presented both content-wise and structurally. Table 2 in the appendix illustrates a variety of approaches how marketing plans are covered. While some textbooks only provide an abbreviated version, others include a complete sample. In addition, several textbooks refer to a marketing plan software.

COURSE CONTEXT FOR CLIENT-SPONSORED PROJECTS IN MARKETING MANAGEMENT

In spring 2010 the instructor taught two courses of Marketing Management. One was an undergraduate course for seniors who choose marketing as their concentration; the other was a required course for MBA students. The setting is a small liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. In both classes the students participated in semester-long client-sponsored projects. The objective for the undergraduate students was to develop an online marketing plan for a client. The MBA students, on the other hand, had to determine themselves the specific content of their marketing project, for which each client company attended the first day of class to present their organization and marketing challenges to the students. At the end of the class students indicated their preference for company projects that were subsequently assigned by the lecturer based on students' interest. With the project brief and instructions from the lecturer, which were also outlined in the course syllabus, students were instructed to meet with the client to determine the specific focus of their marketing project. As a result, these client-based projects were very heterogeneous in their nature. In total, five team projects dealt with different marketing topics:

1. Rebranding strategy including the development and implementation of a new website;
2. Growth strategy and international market entry strategy in the UK;
3. Brand development strategy with focus on online marketing;
4. Online marketing strategy with focus on search and e-mail marketing;
5. Online marketing strategy with focus on social media.

The first milestone in this semester-long project was an industry report after one month in the course schedule. At the end of the semester, the MBA teams made an in-class project presentation and submitted a final project report to the instructor and the client. During the project, students were invited to discuss their progress with the instructor but it was intended that most of the interactions would be with the project sponsor.

From a pedagogical perspective the instructor decided to provide the undergraduate students with more guidance than the graduate students. First, the textbook did not cover material needed to develop an online marketing plan. The instructor used a regular marketing management textbook (see table 1) which covers the traditional marketing mix. However, for the client-based projects the students had to apply knowledge typically covered in an Internet marketing textbook. Second, the textbook only contained an abbreviated sample of a marketing plan which did not serve the purpose of developing an online marketing plan. The instructor then decided to hand out a more specific template from an e-Marketing textbook. The underlying reason was instructor concern that the undergraduate students would be overwhelmed dealing with a challenging topic without any structural guidelines for their final report. The MBA students, while using a different marketing management textbook that included a sample marketing plan, had less guidance with regard to the structure and content of their final report.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT SATISFACTION OF CLIENT-SPONSORED PROJECTS

The instructor conducted two surveys in both classes to address the objectives of this study: the first mid semester and the second at the end of the course. 29 undergraduate and 21 MBA students participated. Student attitudes were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2009). Several open-ended questions were included at the end of the survey as well. Figure 2 presents results of the end-of-semester survey based on student responses.

FIGURE 2
Results of student satisfaction with
client-sponsored project (end of semester)
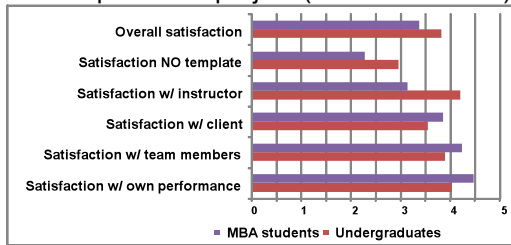
Students evaluated satisfaction based on their own performance, their team members' performance, the client and the instructor. The results indicate that students in both classes evaluated their own performance highest compared to the performance of their team members. It is apparent in the MBA course that students were rather dissatisfied by not having a specific template for their final report. By comparison, the undergraduate class who had used a template were more satisfied than the MBA students. Overall, the average is still low which may be due to the fact that the template was not reflected in the textbook used in class. Most interesting is the large gap in satisfaction with the instructor between the two classes, for which responses to open-ended questions were analyzed. Six of 21 MBA students criticized the lack of guidance and structure for the final paper. Comments include:

> "There should have been more guidance for the final paper throughout the semester. I suggest maybe devoting an entire class session on the marketing report and what it should consist of."
> "He could have given us more guidance and direction."
> "I would have liked to have a template that could have guided us more in the writing and structuring process."

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Reflecting on the two different class scenarios one can distinguish two very different pedagogical approaches with regard to implementing client-sponsored projects and the amount of freedom given to students when preparing their final marketing reports: (1) directive style vs. (2) laissez-faire style. In the undergraduate case, students received more guidance by using textbook templates. This approach seems to be reasonable for undergraduate students who may feel overwhelmed with the complexity of a client-sponsored project. In the graduate case, students are given less guidance or any formal templates, the assumption being that it would be more acceptable

in the MBA course as students are more mature and experienced. Although only approximately 25 percent of the MBA class did comment about the issue of templates, the feedback is important for the next iteration of client-sponsored projects. The key question for educators is how to guide students effectively in preparing final marketing reports for heterogeneous client-based projects. Upon reflection, the instructor made some changes in the current iteration. Instead of either a directive or a laissez-faire style, the instructor has incorporated a seminar style approach. Each MBA team is required to develop a project-specific Table of Content (TOC) in mid semester which has to be approved by the instructor. During this process students are forced to critically think about the content and the outcome of the client-sponsored project. In team meetings with the instructor students receive immediate feedback about the TOC. While there are no specific guidelines on how many times each team will meet with the instructor, it seems that an average of two 30-minute meetings are necessary to develop a comprehensive TOC for the final report. In addition, the instructor may have to respond electronically to the TOC revisions made by the student teams. While the seminar style approach is likely to require more effort and instructor involvement, there is reason to believe that having a pre-approved TOC should help to eliminate students' negative emotions and increase overall student satisfaction with client-sponsored projects.

In conclusion, while there are a number of educational reasons for providing client-sponsored projects to students in marketing (Bove and Davies, 2009), there is a need for careful mentoring the students throughout the semester but in particular during the early stage of developing the structure of their marketing report. The seminar style approach is likely to require more effort and instructor involvement, which supports the view in literature about client-sponsored projects (e.g. Kennedy et al., 2001; Razzouk et al. 2003). As mentioned above, the discussion of a TOC may result in several meetings with each team as students have to revise the structure and content of their TOC a few times.

Overall, it is important to note that these findings apply to two specific courses at a small private liberal arts university in one specific semester. Outcomes with a different type of student (i.e., students at large, public universities) may be different (Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2009). Furthermore, it is too early to make a final judgment about the use of the seminar style in the current iteration of client-based projects.