STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACQUIRED BUSINESS SKILLS THROUGH CLIENT BASED PROJECTS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of experiential learning and acquired business skills through analysis of data collected through a mixed methodology survey following completion of client-based projects, capstone experiences of undergraduate marketing programs at two separate universities. This section presents background, an overview of the conceptual underpinnings of research in the field, underlying assumptions, the educational significance of the study, and the statement of the problem.

BACKGROUND

Through three decades of research on client based, or consulting projects, the data has focused on the results of surveys and comparative quantitative analysis. Client based projects are also commonly called cooperative learning or team experience activities. There is a broad literature base for client-based projects, including observations that a client-based project may be incorporated in most marketing courses (Corbin, 2002; Elam & Spotts, 2004; Maher & Hughner, 2005), that undergraduate students tend to prefer experiential activities, and that students' satisfaction may be related to the challenge of the activities and their relevancy to actual job circumstances (Karns, 1993, 2005). This study seeks to extend the scope of the literature regarding client based projects with qualitative observations of students from two universities over four semesters regarding their perceptions of the general benefits, soft skills, and career preparation received in undergraduate client based marketing programs. These qualitative perspectives extend the quantitative data presented at the 4th Annual Ft. Hays University Business and Leadership Symposium (McCale, 2008), providing context and relevancy for undergraduate client based marketing projects. Additionally, the study provides students' perspective of how the client-based project prepares them for career entry and how working with real business clients reinforces course content.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS FOR THE STUDY

Experiential education has been identified as a preferred method of instruction (Karns, 1993, 2005). However, personal communications from Career Services professionals from Regis University, and internal documents from Regis University Career Services (2009), demonstrated that when attendance at preparatory career planning activities is not required, undergraduate attendance at those events dropped significantly. For example, when attendance at workshops such as "Making a Career Fair Work for You" or "Interviewing Skills" was required of students in the Principles of Marketing course, Career Services staff stated attendance was about 20 students per session. When attendance was not required, Career Services staff stated attendance was 1-3 students per session.

Students in the capstone courses engaged in this study were required to participate. This participation is presented as a bridge between their classroom experiences with the business environment where they will work upon graduation. This is in alignment with the observation that, "Educators need to put students into situations … where they can practice managerial skills, not only interpersonal but also informational and decisional" (Mintzberg, 1976, p. 53). Further, this client-based curriculum aligns with the observation that students must not only possess the requisite "discipline-related skills" to be gainfully employed, they must also demonstrate they have the support skills and soft skills businesses demand of entry-level employees (McCorkle et al., 2003).

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The underlying assumptions of this study are that the experiential learning provided in the capstone courses provides students with "real world" experiences. Among those experiences are soft skills that employers state are sought in entry-level employees, but are not found in traditional curricula: *Communication skills* (Gaedeke, Tootelian, & Schaffer, 1983; Kelley & Gaedeke, 1990; Ducoff & Ducoff, 1990; Ray & Stallard, 1994; Scott & Frontczak, 1996; Floyd & Gordon, 1998), *interpersonal skills* (Gaedeke, et al. 1983; Beamish & Calof, 1989; Deckinger, Brink, Katzenstein, &

Primavera, 1990; Kelly & Gaedeke, 1990; Ray & Stallard, 1994; Scott & Frontczak, 1996; Floyd & Gordon, 1998), and *problem solving skills or critical thinking abilities* (Gaedeke et al., 1983; Kelley & Gaedeke, 1990; Ray & Stallard, 1994; Floyd & Gordon, 1998).

EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

The educational significance of this study is that it may provide additional information to the literature on experiential education. This study may also provide additional information on students' perceptions about the relevancy of the instructional activities that may inform faculty in the development of future courses.

In summary, students' perceptions which have been difficult to find in the literature, may now have a voice in the discussion regarding the types of experiential learning that are not only relevant to today's undergraduates, but also meet the stated needs of employers that those employers indicate are not being met by traditional methods of instruction.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While many experiential activities have been discussed in marketing literature (Karns, 1993, 2005; McCorkle at al. 2003; Mintzberg, 1976), little data were found that detailed the benefits gained from a self-marketing plan (see Literature Review). Further, the data found was quantitative and did not reveal students' perceptions of the value of the experiences through qualitative data analysis.

In summary, there is limited research available regarding the types and degree of benefit that students believe they gain from completing a self-marketing plan as an experiential activity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section describes how the term experiential learning is defined, its historical development, and its role and relevance in education. It also describes the importance of soft skills, and the importance of career preparation for undergraduate students.

Definition of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning, in its basic form, is "learning by doing" (Swan & Hanson, 1996, p. 33). It is also defined as, "a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). The National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (1986) defined experiential learning as the, "learning activities that engage the learner directly in the phenomena being studied" (p. 1).

Historical Development of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning has its foundation in apprenticeships, where experience was the basic component of learning where young people were schooled by masters of their respective trades, with the classroom setting as the primary location for learning becoming a concept of the 12th century university system (Dyer & Schumann, 1993). It was in the 1800s that the divergent systems joined hands-on practice when, "previously apprenticed occupations, such as medical, legal, and dental fields joined the university system (Dyer & Schumann, 1993, p. 32).

In the early 1900s, Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget established the theoretical foundation for experiential learning. Of these, "Lewin and Dewey are two of the most prominent contributors to our understanding of experiential learning (Dyer & Schumann, 1993, p. 34). A fourth, Kolb, emerged, drawing upon the previous three theorists' work. Kolb (1984) stated Dewey is credited with American higher education's acceptance of experiential learning. Dewey (1938) stated, "there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (p. 20). Kolb (1984) further states Lewin, a founder of American social psychology, was instrumental in the study of the "integration of theory and practice" during the 1930s and 1940s" (p. 9). Kolb stated Piaget's work in child developmental psychology contributed to experiential learning in that, "intelligence is shaped by experience … not an innate internal characteristic of the individual" (p. 12). Kolb extended the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget into a framework that became the modern foundation of experiential learning to specific occupational areas of education such as business and engineering (1984).

Importance of Soft Skills

Alam (1998) quoted a speech by a Coopers and Lybrand executive (now PricewaterhouseCoopers) that, "employers have problems not with the knowledge content of marketing graduates, but the level of transferable skills which they possess … because they lack the practical approach … to understand … the application of basic marketing concepts and principles in real life situations" (p. 246). As previously cited, the soft skills employers subsequently identified as important to the

workplace in new hires are communication skills, interpersonal skills, and problem solving skills or critical thinking abilities. Employers believe students to not gain these skills through traditional courses.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed methodology survey to obtain quantitative and qualitative data, but this article's purpose is to predominantly report on the qualitative findings. The survey included a demographic section that asked gender, diversity, year in school, academic major, and work and volunteer experience. The survey obtained quantitative data from a strongly disagree to strongly agree 1-5 Likert scale, 60-item questionnaire. The survey obtained qualitative data from four open-ended questions. The survey was administered online using Student Voice, a university web-based survey system. Student Voice guarantees anonymity of the participant by randomly assigned a numeric identify to each respondent. The survey was administered to 76 undergraduate marketing students at an urban public and an urban private university. The students who completed the survey were enrolled in marketing management and marketing research courses, and had completed client-based projects.

The qualitative data were analyzed from coding of the open-ended responses to reveal if common themes or patterns emerged.

FINDINGS

The context of the participants' voices includes the demographic profile of the 76 students who completed the survey. These demographics provide independent variables of gender, ethnicity, academic standing, and work or volunteer experience. The respondents were nearly evenly split by gender: 43.9% female, 42.7% male, and 13.4% choosing not to respond. With regard to academic standing, 83% identified themselves as seniors, 3.7% as juniors, and the remainder choose not to respond. With regard to academic majors, 40% declared marketing, 12% declared double majors in marketing and management, and 12% declared communications arts. With regard to work and volunteer experience, students were allowed to answer in both categories, provided an aggregate total exceeding 100%. With regard to work, 81.6% indicated they are or had been employed. Of those working, 35% reported working more than 30 hours per week. Over a quarter of the students, 27.6% reported a work history of four years or longer. With regard to volunteers, 53.7% indicated they had

worked in a non-paid role, including both internship and volunteer experience. Of those, 11.8% reported more than 20 hours per week in a volunteer role; and the average tenure was 9.45 months.

While in the quantitative results there were no statically significant differences between the genders, the qualitative indicators tell a different story.

Qualitative results indicate that males had a greater belief of the value of the experience. The *male "voices"* provided context to the strength of opinion of regarding their experiences:

> By doing the real thing this gave me realistic application of the concepts that were otherwise abstract before hand

> Having an assignment that provides real world experience teaches the subject matter in a nonlinear way is always big in my book.

> I believe this class was very beneficial because it put us in the real world. It was very different than a simulation

> The assignment gave me real world experience and will definitely be beneficial in the future.

> This class offered many learning experiences that can be applicable in real life. I truly enjoyed this class and everything it entailed.

In contrast, *female student* observations regarding experiences they may not otherwise have had were more likely tied directly to classroom assignments and learning than personal application skills and knowledge in real world experiences. For example:

> The project was difficult but a valuable learning experience. It was more effective than most traditional textbook courses and I believe it should be used for future classes. As hard as it is, it is worth it.

> Actually applying what is taught in the text and in class is the best way to learn.

> Conducting a research project to me is much more effective in learning the

subject matter than only reading about situations and concepts.

I believe what we have learned in this class validates the precourses we had to take to be here. Also, hands-on is a great way to learn.

I felt like I learned a lot more because I was actually putting my knowledge to use instead of just being tested on it. Making it a hands on class was harder than just reading a book and being tested about my knowledge and I feel like I learned more.

Another critical learning observed by both genders was the experience of a team work. The literature supports direct relevance to instructional pedagogy were that students put into practice group management skills (Mintzberg, 1976), the importance of making business practices relevant in the curricula (Porter & McKibbon, 1988), and the need for students to be better prepared with practical experience to enter an increasingly challenging job market (McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon, & Kling, 2003). With regard to the team environment, students stated:

Male Student: I feel that the group work was hard, but it felt good to be done. I

learn to be in this field you have to make the moves of managers by firing and it's not good to drag things on.

Male Student: It was such a great project for team building, learning to work in a group; having a consistent challenge and goal every week until we presented.

Female Student: It is hard working in a group and having to count on others is very difficult.

There were equally strong voices of students who found the team aspect of the client-based project challenging, as was hinted by the female student above:

Male Student: I think our group chose such an easy survey to conduct it really was not a challenge.

Female Student: I feel this project should have been done on an individual basis. Group projects are usually done half-assed and the individual does not learn all the aspects of the project properly.

References Available on Request