

HAMMER OR SCREWDRIVER? TONGS OR FORKS? PICKING THE RIGHT EXPERIENTIAL “TOOL” TO ACCOMPLISH THE GOAL

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INTRODUCTION

Which is more effective: using a hammer or a screwdriver to hang a picture? Or perhaps would one use a pair of tongs or a dinner fork to turn a piece of meat on a grill? While many people have certainly “made do” with a less-than-ideal options for accomplishing a task (turning meat with a dinner fork; pounding a nail into the wall to hang a picture with any readily available hard object), the right tool makes all the difference in how easily or effectively the objective is accomplished.

So, too, is experiential education. There are a variety of experiential activities as documented in the literature (McCale, 2009). However, which activity is best to use, depending on the instructor’s goals or objectives?

In a series of studies with Jesuit business faculty (2008, 2009), the authors surveyed faculty to understand what experiential activities were incorporated in the classrooms of different disciplines, the challenges faculty experienced in implementing experiential activities, and the benefits to both faculty and students in incorporating experiential education. This article discusses one element of the 345-item survey: what benefits do faculty associate with certain experiential activities? Presumably, faculty would incorporate specific experiential activities to accomplish specific learning goals. This study sought to understand this situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Experiential Education?

In a simple, direct definition, experiential education can be defined as “learning by doing.” (Swan & Hansen, 1996, p. 33). Experiential learning has many benefits: increased student involvement and motivation, understanding of the application of theory in real-world situations, improved communication and critical thinking skills (Frontczak, 1998). Hopkins and Hogg (2004) agree that experiential exercises enhance the student

experience, “There is significant evidence that student-centered approaches to

learning using experiential exercises considerably enhance students’ understanding of substantive theory and also aid acquisition of transferable skills, such as those pertaining to research management and investigation. We consider an experiential pedagogic approach to be particularly rich in helping students to acquire practical skills for and applying critical thought to qualitative research” (p.1).

While the perception of student benefits for a range of experiential activities has been discussed throughout the literature, the specific benefits associated with specific experiential activities, from the point of view or objective of the faculty member, is not as prevalent in the literature. How, then, is a new faculty member, then, to determine how to select the right experiential activity for a given class? Certainly many faculty have experimented through trial and error; but that’s hardly effective and the experience can sometimes yield lower faculty evaluations, a risky move for newly hired faculty. Some may talk with their more senior colleagues and solicit advice; but that may not account for differing objectives, skill sets, strengths or even educational philosophies (preparing students for career entry versus reinforcing course content) or even the differing skill sets of given faculty. As educational pedagogy or teaching skills is not typically a requirement for most doctoral granting institutions, newly minted PhDs often find themselves struggling to stay prepared a few chapters ahead of their students, participate in service activities, meet publishing requirements, and perhaps most importantly, how to convey the material in an engaging, thoughtful way that engages students in a variety of ways.

Experiential Education and Marketing Faculty

A 2008 survey of U.S. Jesuit Business Faculty indicated that 100% of all responding marketing faculty, and 82.9% of business faculty include some form of experiential education in their classrooms, with all business disciplines represented (McCale & Parish, 2008). Marketing respondents indicated they

include internships, simulations, service learning, company audits, case studies, international study, games, community based learning, client based projects, trade show events, student run companies, self marketing plans, prepared roles, shadowing, boardroom exposures, and laboratories. Client based projects were the most commonly used activity in the marketing classroom.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Given the literature review, and the data from the 2008 survey, what student benefits do faculty associate with specific experiential activities?

METHODOLOGY

The 2008 research encompassed a 92-item survey encompassing Likert scaled, closed-ended and open-ended questions, using an online survey delivery program/website. Preliminary results were shared at the Marketing Educators Association Conference in 2009.

Based on learning from the first survey, during the fall of 2009, a second survey was launched with a 345-item survey encompassing Likert scaled, closed-ended and open-ended questions. Only a small portion of the gathered data is included in this article. U.S. Jesuit business program faculty identified by Colleagues in Jesuit Business and the International Association of Jesuit Business Schools were contacted; 216 individuals responded, yielding a 16.5% response rate.

LIMITATIONS

While the 28 Jesuit business schools may represent a fair cross section of U.S. business education, the study could be impacted by the homogeneous philosophic nature of the Jesuit tradition. While the infusion of the Jesuit mission varies from school to school, it is commonly acknowledged that, "Students, in the course of their formation," as Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Jesuits reminds, "must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively." (2000, p. 8).

RESULTS: ACTIVITIES USED

According to the quantitative portion of the faculty survey, 87.16% of total business faculty and 88.24% of marketing faculty use experiential educational tools in the classroom. While all of the experiential activities may be represented in the classrooms of

the broader business discipline, clearly marketing faculty gravitate toward certain activities. Client based, live case or consulting projects are the most commonly used experiential activities according to the marketing respondents, while case studies are more prevalent in the whole of the other business disciplines

STUDENT BENEFITS

Because relatively few marketing faculty used every experiential educational tool, the following analysis of the student benefits of each tool is based on the total business faculty who completed the survey. Each activity's mean score was calculated to determine the professor's assessment of student benefits for each activity. Given those results, a comparison was drawn to determine which activities seemed to reinforce certain skills. The top three reinforced skills' ratings were included in a comparison chart.

In 12 out of the 15 benefits listed, one of the top three benefits for including the various activities was the application of theoretical concepts: related to this was the importance of content reinforcement appears to be a key factor for faculty to include experiential activities. As the two items could be considered similar or inextricably tied, the data demonstrate that clearly, faculty identify the application of theory to the real world, thus reinforcing content as the number one reason for including *any* experiential activity in their classroom. This seems to make logical sense.

However, the literature identifies other benefits students gain from experiential activities: soft skills have been stated to be a significant reason for including experiential activities in the classroom (Frontczak, 1998). While writing skills (two activities), communication skills (six activities) and leadership skills (six activities) were identified as part of the top three student benefits, other "soft skills" such as conflict resolution and teamwork were not in any top three student benefits for any experiential activity. While not typically categorized as "soft skills" by the literature, information technology/computer skills nor project management skills were considered to be in the top three student benefits either. The improvement of presentation skills was in the top three benefits to students for only one activity: student run/teaching companies.

While six activities were seen as beneficial to preparing students for the real world, client based projects/consultancy or live cases had the highest mean in this category, possibly implying that when

marketing faculty believe that preparing students for career entry as an important goal for their class, client based projects may be the activity of choice. This seems to be correlative with the sizable percentage of marketing faculty including client based projects in their curricula (73%). While client based projects can certainly be beneficial, does every class in the marketing discipline warrant a client based project? Such an approach could certainly burn out students with multiple client based projects, and could tax faculty already stretched thin for time. Would a scaffolding approach be more beneficial to both students and faculty, placing different experiential activities in different classes to reinforce or provide different benefits?

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this article was to provide discussion and exploration to determine if faculty associated certain benefits with specific experiential activities? Ideally, the results would have lead to a matrix that would help more inexperienced faculty make decisions regarding which experiential activity to include, given their goals for what the students would gain (i.e., if a faculty member wants to help develop communication skills, then consider one of this group of activities).

Some results appeared to be logical, as in the case of client based projects. Other gaping holes emerged, forming even more questions. If the literature states that soft skills are a key reason to include or benefit of experiential activities, then why did few soft skill benefits appear in the top three for the various activities? Or perhaps, while marketing faculty indicate they include such activities because they improve soft skills because employers so often

indicate these are lacking in entry level employees? But in reality, we include experiential activities – *any* experiential activity-- for the core purpose of applying and reinforcing the theoretical concepts presented in the course?

Certainly one of the major issues with any systematic or comparative study of experiential activities is the lack of formalized definitions that exist for the various activities, as noted by the leadership of National Society of Experiential Education (NSEE) (Jim Walters, personal communication, 2009; Susan Harkness, personal communication, Ph.D., 2009; Lynne Montrose, personal communication, 2009). While faculty may perceive or believe students receive certain benefits from certain experiential activities, is it more important to understand and measure in a methodical manner what *students* perceive they gained?

Further research to clarify definitions of activities has been conducted by the authors and is also underway with NSEE. Future analysis also includes the understanding if marketing faculty identify or define various experiential activities differently than other business faculty; how various disciplines or the total of business faculty rate the perceived student benefits of the various activities; and faculty challenges for implementing experiential activities relative to each activity's prevalence. Additionally, the authors will compare previous research about the students' perceptions of the benefits gained from various experiential activities to the current faculty perceptions.

References Available on Request