DELIVERING THE UNDERGRADUATE MARKETING RESEARCH COURSE AS A FUNCTIONING RESEARCH FIRM

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ABSTRACT

More and more faculty are coming to realize that the traditional lecture format is not the most effective for today's classroom. Guskin (1994) comments that "the primary learning environment for undergraduate students, the fairly passive lecture-discussion format where faculty talk and most students listen, is contrary to almost every principle of optimal settings for student learning" (p.20). In an effort to overcome the ineffectiveness of the traditional method, many faculty and departments are experimenting with innovative approaches to learning.

The purpose of this article is to describe an experiential learning method that has been used successfully for five years in teaching the undergraduate course in marketing research. The course uses the model of a functioning, marketing research firm where student teams complete actual marketing research projects as consultants for actual clients. Using this model students are able to successfully learn, apply, and understand the major steps of the marketing research process.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The concept of experiential learning, as popularized by Kolb (1984) and Schon (1983), concerns itself with a process where reflection-on-experience unfolds in different contexts to create knowledge. This concept relating to learning through experience focuses on reflective construction of meaning, with particular emphasis on critical reflection and dialogue. When brought into the purview of the educator, the notion of experiential learning has been appropriated to designate everything from kinesthetic-directed instructional activities in the classroom to special workplace projects interspersed with critical dialogue led by a facilitator (Fenwick 2000).

Several excellent examples of successful marketing classroom experiential learning projects have been presented in the literature (see for example Bobbitt et al. 2000; Graeff, 1997). These articles document the process of requiring students to apply the theoretical concepts, models, and theories of a course or courses to a marketing project. In each case the authors testify to the increased effectiveness of learning through the use of experiential learning methods as measured by objective assessment and student self-report. However, in the articles reviewed the projects students worked on were artificial projects created for the classroom. In the pedagogy that is the subject of this article, students are required to conduct a marketing research project for an actual client organization.

THE CLIENT-BASED PROJECT

The marketing research course is established from the start as a marketing research firm. Students are referred to as associates of the firm responsible in teams of three for identifying a client, generating and implementing a research project with that client, and presenting a final research report to both the client and the firm. The role of the professor is that of senior partner, responsible for supervision of associates and serving as a resource. The environment is cooperative, not competitive, in that the firm is most successful when all research projects being completed are done so successfully.

Course Description

The course syllabus introduces the course and the setting as follows:

"Each fall the university offers a course, BUS 450 Marketing Research. Rather than operate this course as a traditional class, it is run more as a business (the *firm*). Rather than receive a course syllabus, students (referred to as *associates*) receive this *Associates Handbook* outlining the values, expectations and policies of the firm. The *goal* of the firm is to effectively educate its associates to understand and be able to apply the marketing research process. The *business* of *the firm* is to conduct quality marketing research for organizations in the community, providing a valuable service that allows associates an opportunity to practice research skills."

Values Statement

An important component of the course is to instill upon students a concern for ethical values in business, and specifically in marketing research where the opportunity for misrepresentation and fraud is great. To that end the course syllabus lists the following value statement for *the firm*:

- The ultimate goal of this endeavor is to allow each and every associate to grow in knowledge and understanding in a spirit of cooperation, not competition.
- No associate within the organization is more valuable than another, each brings unique strengths and weaknesses to this endeavor that are to be appreciated. Associates working together are far more valuable to the firm than associates working independently.
- It is the responsibility of the *senior partner* (the instructor) to be readily available at *scheduled meetings* (scheduled class times) and at other times as needed to serve as a resource to each associate, ensuring that each associate has a fair opportunity to achieve the stated objectives of the firm.
- It is the responsibility of each associate to uphold his or her responsibility to the firm which includes completing all assigned tasks on time, attempting to always do one's best, and being a responsible member of a research team completing one's fair share of the task.
- It is the responsibility of the senior partner and each associate to communicate openly and honestly, being willing to confront each other when there is a concern, a lack of clarity or understanding, or any unresolved issue.
- No information will ever be presented to clients or fellow associates purported to represent greater accuracy or precision than what can be objectively demonstrated. Any limitations or flaws in information will always be clearly disclosed.

Assigned versus Student-Identified Client Organizations

The first time this course was offered the professor attempted to arrange business contacts in advance for students to use to identify potential projects. A dozen corporations and organizations were contacted and agreed to cooperate with students to complete an appropriate research project. When the class met it became clear that students at this university had their own contacts and organizations they wanted to work with. Consequently the prearranged contacts were not used and students pursued projects with organizations where a relationship already existed.

In five years of teaching the course there have been repeated cases where the research done by students has been instrumental in their obtaining part-time employment during school and full-time employment upon graduation. The research project becomes an important part of the student's portfolio, providing tangible evidence of the student's ability to implement the research project and to work as part of a team.

Based on past experience the course is now designed to require students to identify and contact their own organization to establish research opportunities. A benefit of having the student initiate contact with the client is greater responsibility on the part of the student toward the client compared to the situation of being assigned a client organization. Research teams are formed by having students with prospective clients present those opportunities to the class in an effort to recruit other students to join the team. Proposals failing to attract a team of three are dropped from consideration.

Criteria for Selecting Client Firm

Often organizations that students would like to work with are not good candidates because managers are not available to work with students, appropriate projects are not available for students to complete, or confidentiality concerns prevent students from easily accessing needed information. The course handbook presents the following criteria to student teams:

Each research team will be responsible for identifying and making arrangements to work with a client. Eligible clients can include companies, churches, and organizations. The following criteria should be applied in selecting a client to work with during the semester:

1. A representative of the client organization must be readily available to meet with the research team periodically to clarify objectives, approve activities, answer questions, and provide access to information resources. (In-person meetings are desirable two or three times, other contact can be by phone.)

2. The client must be able to provide a list of contacts to be surveyed (when appropriate).

3. The client must be willing to pay any costs associated with the research (long distance, mileage, printing, fax, and postage).

4. The client should arrange a meeting of appropriate organization members at the end of the semester for a presentation of results by the research team.

Criteria for Research Project

The main criteria for an acceptable research project is that it include a primary data collection activity (survey or structured interview) of a minimum of 50 respondents. This sample size was chosen to allow students to wrestle with the major problems of designing and implementing a survey and to provide sufficient first-hand experience in collecting data. For projects that require a larger sample size, students are allowed to enlist the aid of others in collecting the data. Often student teams struggle (and fail) to achieve this minimum sample size.

Project Outputs

Students are required to prepare and present a series of written and oral outputs for the client organization and the class. These assignments are:

Research Agreement. Each team prepares a letter of agreement for the client organization that includes: the general nature of the research project, the population to be studied for the project, the methods to be used to conduct the research, names of organizational contacts, and the agreed upon time frame for research. Each research team submits the letter of agreement to the senior partner. Provided corrections are not required, the senior partner mails the agreements to the client.

Preliminary Research Plan. Each team prepares and submits for review a two-page report to the client identifying the specifics of how each of the steps in the research process will be implemented. This document requires students to identify the need for research, questions of interest to management, research objectives to be achieved, and sources of information to be used in conducting the research. Each research team submits their plan to the senior partner who approves it and mails it to the client.

Data Collection Instrument. Each team submits the data collection instrument (survey or interview form) for approval prior to its being used. Instruments are also circulated and discussed in class for review and improvement. Several class sessions are devoted to pairs of teams exchanging work for evaluation and critique. These sessions then result in questions for the entire firm to discuss which are tied back to theory by the senior partner.

Final Research Report. Each team prepares and submits a final written report to the client identifying the results of the research project, limitations of the research, implications to the organization, and recommendations for follow-up or future research.

Presentation of Final Report. Each team makes a presentation to the class of their research and findings. Teams are encouraged (but not required) to present their findings to their client organization. Often the client will attend the class session when their report is being presented.

Other Aspects of Being a Firm

The assumption from the start is that all members of a team will receive the same grade for the team project which accounts for 50 percent of the course grade. Each of the project outputs is graded separately. If teams have a nonparticipating or otherwise dysfunctional member, they are constantly reminded throughout the semester to confront that individual and, if necessary, involve the instructor in such confrontation. Teams meet individually with the instructor throughout the semester, providing regular opportunities to identify and resolve such problems.

The instructor maintains a subjective "meter" on the value of work in progress, reporting periodically through the semester the value of the firm's work. At the end of the course a market value is assigned to the firm's completed research (typically $2,000 to $10,000 per project). Teams are encouraged to keep track of their "billable hours" to be able to estimate, on a per hour basis, the value of their work. This exercise instills a valuable lesson pertaining to the life of being an independent consultant, a career toward which some students aspire.

ESTABLISHING AND ACHIEVING LEARNING OUTCOMES

To establish that one teaching method is more effective than another requires that one establish objective learning outcomes and determine if those outcomes are better achieved using the new method. McCorkle et al. (1999) examined academic pedagogy and identified four categories of preparation required for marketing students to successfully enter the workplace: (1) discipline-related knowledge, (2) discipline-related skills, (3) support skills, and (4) personal characteristics. This classification schema provides a useful framework for establishing and providing a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching methods in marketing. Each of the four categories will be described followed by a description of how it is addressed by the consulting firm method of teaching marketing research.

Discipline-related knowledge involves understanding the marketing theories and concepts of the course. Discipline-related knowledge for this course focuses on thoroughly understanding the eleven major steps of the marketing research process (Burns and Bush 2000). Each of the steps are first presented and discussed in class in a traditional lecture and discussion format. Students are then required to immediately apply the theory to their consulting project, providing context and creating a need to understand and be able to apply each major concept.

To the extent that theory presented in class does not meet knowledge needs created by the consulting project, students are motivated to further study and examine theory to identify relevant concepts and methods.

Discipline-related skills (also called core or work-related skills) involve the experience and practice of theories. In business and marketing courses this is most often accomplished through the use of case studies and similar projects, allowing students to apply appropriate theories to documented situations in the classroom setting. One weakness of this approach is often the inability of the student to identify with the situation due to a lack of meaningful industry experience, especially at the undergraduate level.

Students are provided the opportunity to practice each step using appropriate in-class exercises, knowing they will need to be able to apply those same skills to their consulting project. Students are then required to apply each of the steps to their consulting project. This intentional repetition allows students to fully explore and more thoroughly understand underlying concepts and concerns of the marketing research process. Through work on an actual consulting project, students have no option but to recognize the relevance and application of appropriate theories required to meet obligations to their client. Specific class time is devoted to discussing consultant-client relationships and talking about the need to serve both internal and external clients in an organization.

Support skills are skills and abilities that are relevant to a broad range of jobs or careers and include creativity, decision making, communication, and teamwork. While traditional classroom activities allow limited development of these skills, the consulting project provides an opportunity for the student to externally validate the effectiveness of such skill development. Having to complete 50 or more surveys as a student team, having to design and delegate responsibilities for completing the project among team members, and having to effectively communicate with the client to obtain and provide information, all serve to motivate students to maximize their learning in these important areas.

Personal characteristics are other qualities that may be of interest to potential employers including being responsible, mature, enthusiastic, self-motivated, ambitious, and self-confident. The consulting project opens many opportunities for the faculty member to identify and work with students on developing these skills. Through peer and self-assessment, students are able to gain objective feedback on their development along these dimensions.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally the primary focus of academic preparation has been on discipline-related knowledge with limited emphasis on skill and character development. As a result of the experience presented in this article it is argued that development of discipline-related skills and support skills has resulted in better comprehension of discipline-related knowledge. Requiring students to apply and use discipline-related knowledge and skills in an actual project for an actual client has resulted in a very high level of understanding. By requiring students to accurately apply skills and methods, and having them be responsible to an outside client, the effectiveness of learning is greatly enhanced.

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