

SEQUENTIAL CLIENT-BASED PROJECTS: TAKING STUDENT TEAM LEARNING TO A NEW LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

Sequential student projects are projects where students use the work of students from a preceding semester and implement the recommendations made in that earlier semester. This paper reports on an examination of student reactions to performing sequential projects in two separate settings. Student reactions are compared to a control group that did not receive recommendations from preceding classes, but rather received strategic recommendations from the client. Findings and issues are reported.

BACKGROUND

Group projects have become an integral part of the marketing curriculum as part of an effort to enhance student learning. The opportunity to provide students with practical experience accompanied with practice working with others provides an alternative to the passive learning environment of the traditional lecture based course. Group projects can, however, take many different forms and those forms provide different value in terms of the quality of the learning that takes place with them. This paper describes a sequential approach to group projects where student teams must use the research and recommendations of previous student teams and implement their recommendations in a real world situation.

Three basic approaches have been used to provide more valuable student learning experiences and reflect the push for a shift in the learning paradigm from passive to active (Barr and Tagg 1995; Saunders 1997). They are team-based approaches, experiential learning, and client-based projects. Team based approaches have provided an effective cooperative learning technique (Allen et al. 1987; Holter 1994; Amato and Amato 2005). Experiential learning approaches have provided more active learning experiences (Kolb 1984; Hamer 2000; Smith and Van Doren 2004). Experiential learning also increases involvement making it more effective (Morgan et al (1987). Client-based projects have provided increased reality (Elam and Spotts 2004; Lopez and Lee 2005). However none of these approaches is without problems.

Team based approaches, while valuable, may prove to be too difficult to implement in many courses and can meet with resistance by faculty (Smith and Van

Doren 2004). Experiential learning and client-based approaches provide excellent student experiences, however, the problems that occur in "real-world" situations may also distract students from the important lessons for which the projects were designed (Gunz 1995). This paper describes two class projects where reality is taken to a higher level. Not only do students make concrete recommendations to a real client, but a later class is then charged with implementing the recommendations of the preceding class.

Experiential learning in the form of group projects has received much attention in the literature (de Los Santos and Jensen 1985; Dommeyer 1986; Williams, Beard, and Rymer 1991; Graeff 1997; Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, and Mayo 2000; Hamer 2000; Smith and Van Doren 2004). In practice, we have referred to experiential learning as having students actually do something versus simply reflect on it or read about it. Kolb's framework describing the processes and styles of learning would thus place experiential learning (concrete experience with active experimentation) in the dynamic learner quadrant. See Elam and Spotts (2004) for a more thorough description of the Kolb model applied to experiential learning.

Client based projects provide an excellent opportunity for students to develop the ability to work in a group to solve complex "real-world" problems and engage in strategic thinking and problem solving. Even though these projects provide excellent learning opportunities, educators often choose not to use them because of the amount of work required to implement them effectively (Goodell and Kraft 1991; Razzouk, Seitz, and Rizkallah 2003). However, if approached properly, client-based projects can be manageable (Lopez and Lee 2005), and can provide learning opportunities that will be more readily transferable to settings outside the classroom (Smith and Van Doren 2004).

Elam and Spotts (2004) described a project that applied many of the principles of case-based experiential learning where they had three classes perform different functional areas in a client project. This approach was highly effective for a number of reasons. First, it succeeded in providing a realistic environment for student teams. Second, it help to avoid the problem of having students focus only on those ac-

tivities they most enjoy (usually the creative function of advertising). Third, it forced students to coordinate with other teams and use the work of others to help fulfill their own responsibilities. In this way, students gained exposure to the difficulties of communication and coordination between work groups in a major project.

This paper reports on three course projects that shed light on this approach by incorporating one significant difference in the project design, sequential projects, and describes student reactions in the same terms used by Elam and Spotts (2004). Where Elam and Spotts (2004) used three classes executing different areas of a project during the same semester, this paper reports on projects where students handed off preliminary research to another class in a subsequent semester. This approach may be more practical in situations where courses cannot be offered simultaneously or coordination is difficult. The remainder of this paper will describe the projects and then report on the experience from the perspective of the instructors and the students.

Two professors initiated sequential projects where students conducted research during one semester and in the following semester students were charged with implementing the recommendations from the prior semester. In one case, the courses differed, starting with a Consumer Behavior course conducting research on which services students felt were the most lacking on campus and how they could correct the deficiency. That project then concluded with a Professional Selling course, which implemented the project and did selling of the new service. In the second case a sport marketing course conducted research resulting in recommendations on how to improve attendance at men's basketball games on the campus. In the subsequent semester students in the same course implemented the recommendations. The two projects will now be described in more detail.

Project 1

Class 1 members were directed to analyze the needs of the nearly 8,000 business majors with respect to on-campus services, and to determine which services were deemed lacking or insufficient. This process was to take place via surveys designed, written, and executed by all members of a Consumer Behavior class and distributed to business students attending a career week event. Once a determination of need was identified, the execution of the solution to that need would be carried out the following semester by a Professional Selling class taught by the same faculty member. It was expected

that a number of students would sign up for the first course and continue on with the second course. In fact, five out of twenty seven, took both classes and their experiences are noted in upcoming comments. The second class had thirty six total students including the five from the first class. Almost all of the students were first or second semester seniors. Second semester seniors, however, were taking the course in a sequence that would not allow them to see the results from the following class since they would be graduating upon completion of the first class. Only first semester seniors had the option of continuing on to the next class. This project had a number of objectives:

- The exercise was designed to have students identify a problem (need recognition) facing the current student population which challenged them to evaluate their own needs and wants as marketing majors.
- The exercise provided students with a non-structured way to solve the problem so that they would be forced to look at a multitude of potential solutions and choose the most beneficial one, from a cost / benefit standpoint.
- The exercise allowed them to interact with corporations outside of the University in a way that gave them experience in 'primary research' and negotiation methods.
- The exercise provided them with the insight to understand the importance of 'giving back' to the student community.
- The exercise required that the students research the University hierarchy and find the decision makers who would allow for, or deny, implementation of the new service. i.e., interact with University Asset Management office, Dean's office, etc.
- The exercise illustrated how students, non-profit institutions, and for profit corporations can all work together to generate long term relationships with each other.

Project 2

Students in a senior level sports marketing seminar course were given the charge of conducting research in the community to determine how best to encourage residents of the surrounding community to attend men's basketball games at the university. Students were given a set of six steps including problem definition, research proposal, research analysis and summary, strategic recommendations, and recommended tactics. A final phase incorporated all phases into a final report. The reports were presented to the head of marketing for the athletic department and approved for future use.

The following semester, students in the same course were charged with implementation of the recommendations from the preceding semester. They were first required to familiarize themselves with the work from the prior semester and then given the option of also conducting their own research to answer any additional questions they had. Students were given access to the final grade for each project as an indication of a paper's quality; however, they were also told that the grade reflected much more than the quality of the ideas and that they should judge for themselves which ideas would be most effective. Also occurring that semester, another section of the same course was asked to perform the same project but for the women's basketball team. In this second case all groups were given marketing strategy information provided by the NCAA. This class was given no information from another class and was used as a control group.

In the case of both projects, students were told that students in the subsequent semester would be shown their work, and use it to advance the project recommendations. Students were also assured that their individual grade/performance on the project would not be shown to anyone, but that the instructor comments that were written in their team papers would be shown to the students in the next class. No student objections were raised.

METHOD

After concluding their projects, students were asked to complete a questionnaire that contained twenty questions about their project experience. Eighteen questions were taken from Elam and Spotts (2004). The survey consisted of a series of statements about the project experience and students were instructed to respond to each statement on a seven-point scale anchored by 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree. Two additional questions were used to measure student feelings about the sequential nature of the project. Students were given course credit for completing the short questionnaire. Project 1 had an $n=28$, Project 2 had an $n=21$, and the control group had an $n=31$ for a total of 80 students participating in the study.

RESULTS

Generally, students had positive reactions to the sequential projects. Table 1 shows means for the three classes on all of the questions. In particular, they preferred the project to a lecture and they felt they gained a strong appreciation for working in a group. In most cases the control group (the students who did not receive recommendations from a

class in a prior semester) was slightly lower in their project ratings than the two sequential project groups. On seven of the questions, between group differences were statistically significant at the $p < .10$ level. A confounding factor exists in the results as an artifact of the fact that Project 2 and the control group were taught by the same professor while Project 1 was taught by a different professor. Therefore ratings may be caused by the instructor and/or course content rather than the project itself. However, when we compare Project 2 to the control group we can see that they gave higher ratings to several significant questions. Including "I put a great deal of effort into this project," ($p=.005$); "As a result of this project, I have a greater appreciation of project management skills," ($p=.085$); and "I think that having the results from a prior research project helped my team make this project better," ($p=.003$).

Overall, the ratings given by the students completing Project 1 were higher on 17 of the 20 items than the ratings of the control group. The ratings of Project 2 students were higher than the control group on 15 of the twenty items. Again, because Project 2 students had the same instructor as the control group their responses to the project would be expected to be more similar. Also, the control and Project 2 projects were identical except for the information supplied by the prior class and the fact that the control group was working on the women's basketball team and Project 2 was working on the men's basketball team.

DISCUSSION

Three classes were used to examine several significant questions of whether or not sequential projects could be valuable as an experiential teaching method in marketing courses. Results indicate that student reactions were at least as positive as the reactions of students who did not complete a sequential project. Additionally, there was limited evidence that the sequential project experience was better, particularly in the area of project management skills. Also, students felt that the results from the project from the prior projects helped to make their projects better.

Due to the small sample size, and the use of a control group for comparison that did not have an identical experience, it is important to continue this stream of research to more clearly understand the effects of sequential projects. While sequential projects clearly allow students to deal with a different type of ambiguity, namely evaluating the work of others, they also provide a chance for students to practice implementation and coordination skills. The opportunity to use sequential projects to help students to develop their

TABLE 1
MEAN RATINGS FOR THREE CLASSES: PROJECTS 1 AND 2 DID SEQUENTIAL PROJECTS,
THE CONTROL GROUP RECEIVED RESEARCH FROM THE CLIENT ORGANIZATION

Question	Project 1 Student Ser- vices	Control Women's Basketball	Project 2 Men's Bas- ketball
As a learning experience, this project was more productive than listening to a lecture. *b	5.54	5.00	4.47
As a learning experience, this project was more enjoyable than listening to a lecture. *ab	5.50	4.74	4.28
Compared to group projects in other business-related courses, this project was more productive.	5.28	5.10	5.47
Compared to group projects in other business-related courses this project was less enjoyable. (reverse item)	2.96	3.33	2.76
Having students in other classes provide information was a positive aspect of this project.	5.50	N/A	5.28
As a result of completing this project, I have a greater appreciation of what it takes to work in a group. a	5.46	4.87	5.47
My understanding of the marketing planning process was enhanced by this project.	5.35	5.16	5.28
This project should not be assigned to future classes. (reverse item) ab	2.17	2.96	3.04
This project was one of the best parts of this course. * a	5.10	4.12	4.52
Compared to writing a term paper, this project was more interesting.	6.07	5.71	5.90
I feel confident that I could now complete this type of project for a company or organization.	5.17	5.16	5.47
The learning experience provided by this project was not worth the effort. (reverse item)	2.82	2.90	2.71
My understanding of marketing activities was enhanced by this project.	5.07	5.12	5.42
This project gave me stronger motivation to work hard at learning than listening to lectures does. *a	5.14	4.44	4.38
I put a great deal of effort into this project. *bc	4.78	5.25	5.90
This project allows me to apply marketing concepts to a hands-on business project.	5.57	5.29	5.76
As a result of this project, I now have a greater appreciation of team management skills.	5.32	5.06	5.52
As a result of completing this project, I have a greater appreciation of project management skills.*c	5.39	4.90	5.61
I think this project would have been better if I could have talked to the people who did the research that my team used. c	4.53	4.25	4.85
I think that having the results from a prior research project helped my team make this project better. *ac	5.28	4.38	5.57

*p<.10

^a columns 1 and 2 are significantly different at p<.10

^b columns 1 and 2 are significantly different at p<.10

^c columns 1 and 2 are significantly different at p<.10

project implementation skills should be exploited.

The sequential method of experiential projects is not without its difficulties. Among the challenges faced by the instructors were the hesitancy of students to rely on the work of other students whom they did not know, the variation in quality of work produced by the students in the preceding classes, and the feasibility of the ideas created by groups of students who were not responsible for implementation of their ideas.

In the case of Project 1, students in the preceding course came up with a single recommendation so there was no variability in what students in the second class received. It should be noted that a single

instructor taught both classes in Project 1, and was able to guide the students through the different tasks. It was set up this way, by the instructor, based on the learning objectives of each course syllabus. However, in Project 2 there were five student teams and they were allowed to use the recommendations of any of six student teams from the preceding semester. Thus, students struggled to decide which team's recommendations to use. Of course, this can provide a valuable learning experience, but a difficult task for students. Again, a single professor taught both classes in Project 2.

One of the biggest drawbacks of using sequential projects was the loss of first hand experience at conducting all stages of a project. Also, students from the later

classes were unable to consult with the students from the prior classes, except in the case of Project 1 where five students had taken the second course after being in the first course. In this particular case, the five students who enrolled in both classes, shared their experiences and data with the students from the second class, in class discussions and project strategy sessions. Nonetheless, students in both project groups indicated that they felt that the project would have been better if they had been able to talk to the students that had done the original research. This created a question in some 'second' term students as to whether or not the best choices were, in fact, made by the 'first' term students. Furthermore, several students conveyed a 'disconnect' of sorts, stemming from the fact that there were so many tasks and so little time, that they 'individually' were assigned only a small part of the overall responsibilities, and as a result, didn't 'experience' the satisfaction that being more deeply involved from the beginning might have brought them.

In an effort to overcome some of these shortcomings changes will be implemented in Project 2. After discussions with the project client, it was agreed that in future semesters the project would be redesigned such that each semester all students would implement the recommendations from the preceding semester and also conduct their own research for the purpose of making recommendations for the subsequent semester. Hopefully, this change will serve to make students more sensitive to the difficulties others have when implementing someone else's recommendations. Also, it will give students the opportunity to perform both stages of the project and still have an entire semester to implement the recommendations made.

The biggest advantage of using sequential projects is that students can be exposed to projects that are too large to be completed in a single semester. Also, they can experience implementation, something that is often excluded from student projects due to time limitations. Another important advantage of using sequential projects is that many service learning opportunities are ongoing and having a project run over several semesters allows many students to be involved in valuable experiences. In the particular case of Project 1, establishing contact with outside corporations was paramount to financially supporting the students in their efforts to fund their research and find a solution to their on-campus problem. The students were able to secure a material donation from one company, and a cash donation from another. This was critical to the outcome since the University itself provided no funds for this learning experience. This collaboration provided a clear illustration of how non-profit, student powered

organizations and outside private corporations can work together for mutual gain.

In conclusion, we believe that the evidence support further examination of the use of sequential projects in marketing courses. Students benefit through the experience of using information provide by others, as is often the case in the workplace. Also, sequential projects keep clients engaged over longer periods of time.

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