THE CONCEPT OF INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING IN MBA MARKETING COURSES

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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 an approach of "intergenerational service-learning" in an MBA Marketing course at a University in New Zealand. The instructor facilitated a service-learning scenario in which MBA alumni were project sponsors for current MBA students. Approximately 40 MBA students executed these client-sponsored projects in groups of four to five individuals. This paper describes the teaching and learning concept, discusses learning benefits and suggests potential improvements for the next iteration.

INTRODUCTION: MAKING USE OF THE "KNOWLEDGE GENERATION"

In education, instructors are often faced with finding 'real world' applications to enrich their teaching to facilitate a more practice-related learning experience. Students who are involved in a practical exercise such as a project seem to have a much greater learning experience than through the more traditional learning approaches such as tests (Humphreys, 1981). Projects can be implemented by making use of the concept of service-learning (see e.g., Govekar & Rishi, 2007), similar to the idea of "client-sponsored projects" (e.g. Humphreys, 1981), at times also called "living cases" (LeClair & Stöttinger, 1999). Service-learning centers around students' involvement in community service projects within the structure of credit-bearing educational experience (Berry & Workman, 2007). It has been seen to be a reciprocal approach as it benefits the community or company (service recipient), the student (service provider), the course instructor (service-learning facilitator) and the educational institution (service-learning governing body) (see Jacoby, 1996). A critical issue in service-learning projects which involve companies is the sourcing of the projects. In a marketing context, approaching industry can be strenuous for the lecturer as companies may not be willing to spend time on defining a project for students. A simple way out of this dilemma seems to be to make use of past generations of students working in firms and their potentially greater openness to the notion of utilizing a student team to address a business issue of interest or concern. Their experience with the same study program as of the current students may lead to greater benefits when sponsoring a student group project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intergenerational Teaching and Learning (ITL) is not a new term but mainly used in a gerontological context where younger individuals work together with aged people (Nichols & Monard, 2001). ITL in an educational environment is usually concerned with the one of the following (Kaplan, 2001):

- *Youth serving older people*: Students provide a service by engaging seniors in a variety of services in a variety of contexts, such as expanding their social support networks.
- *Elders serving youth*: In the case where seniors provide a service for students, the most common roles taken by the seniors are the ones of tutor and mentor. Intergenerational tutoring sessions can occur either on a one-to-one basis, in smaller groups or as part of an entire class.
- *Adults and youth collaborating in service and/or learning*: In these joint initiatives young and old partner try to achieve an external goal. This goal does not primarily have to center on the needs of the young or old participants; it may be to improve the community or providing a service for another group.

Kerka (2003) states that intergenerational learning builds social capital, citing work by Balatti and Falk (2002) who refer to social capital as the resources of networks, norms or shared values, and trust to which individuals have access as community members. Individuals can draw on these tangible and intangible resources and relationships and may have enhanced life opportunities. Communities, in which trust, reciprocity and social networks are strong, are perceived to benefit from collective action and cooperation. ITL has been applied by establishing intergenerational service-learning

projects (e.g., Karasik et al., 2004; Lamson et al., 2006; Nichols & Monard, 2001).

The resource-based idea of intergenerational learning by using networks as well as the idea of service-learning seem to be of particular relevance for the context of teaching and learning in universities by involving past generations of MBA students to teach and help facilitate learning of the current generation of students. The term intergenerational here denotes the difference between current students and graduates rather than relating to a biological age gap. It is therefore used to describe "a group of individuals belonging to a specific category at the same time…." (Dictionary.com, 2010), either being students or alumni.

Similarities to the idea of ITL can also be found in concepts such as mentoring (e.g., Wanberg et al., 2006). Mentoring concepts have been applied to business and also particularly marketing students in universities (Finsterwalder et al., 2005; Schlee, 2000). In a university context, mentoring can be described as a course-related support (mentorship) of a consulter (student) through an experienced advisor (alumnus / alumna with professional expertise) (Finsterwalder et al., 2005). This is in line with the role of a tutor or mentor outlined by Kaplan (2001) above. Hat-ton-Yeo and Purcell (2002, p. 6), for example, speak of "intergenerational mentoring".

CONCEPT OF ITL FOR MBA STUDENTS IN A SERVICE-LEARNING MARKETING PROJECT

The concept of ITL was applied to a MBA marketing course involving approximately 40 MBA students and eight 'elders', i.e. mostly former MBA students (alumni) now working for a variety of companies. Prior to the marketing course, MBA alumni respectively marketing managers of companies were contacted and invited to submit a marketing project proposal. On day one of the MBA marketing course, the company group projects were presented to the students. Groups of four to five students were assigned to each company. With the project brief and instructions from the lecturer, students were seconded to work on the company projects for two months. This included a re-briefing memo to be submitted after two weeks into the project and a project presentation followed by the final project report at the end of the course.

The *objectives* of the intergenerational service-learning projects were as follows:
- Learning to work on a marketing project using a problem-based learning approach (see Biggs,

2003; Boud, 1985) through immediate application of marketing course content either already covered in the lectures or to be discovered by the students through self-initiated inquiry.
- Working with real-world companies with company sponsors in a mentorship role.
- Learning to work in teams.

Based on the intergenerational concept it was expected that:
- Most of the interaction would occur between the group and the sponsor and that students could relate better to the project sponsors, most of which were former MBA students.
- Students would benefit from the experience and knowledge of the project sponsors; most of whom went through a similar process when studying.
- Project sponsors with a MBA background or being one of the University's MBA alumni would have a better understanding of the students' situation while working on the project and therefore would mentor the projects differently.

Figure 1 depicts the concept termed intergenerational service-learning (ISL) as a triangle made of the MBA students, MBA alumni or other project sponsors and the course coordinator. ISL happens in interaction of students and sponsors. The course coordinator can facilitate ISL in two ways. On the one hand, the instructor can interact with the companies and ask for feedback on how the projects have progressed (indirect facilitation of ISL). On the other hand, the instructor can support the student teams offering team meetings and, of course, more actively by teaching the relevant course content ((re-)active facilitation of ISL).

FIGURE 1
ISL IN AN MBA MARKETING COURSE
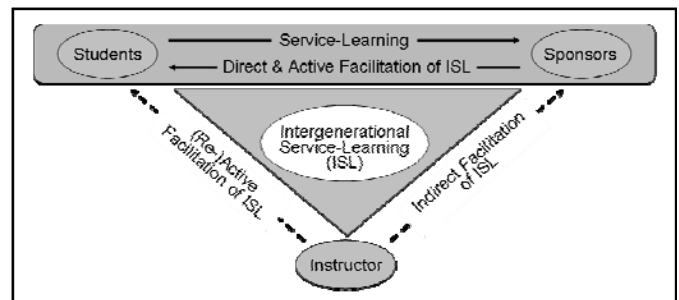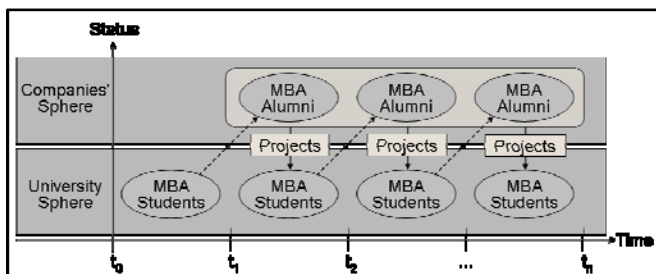

Figure 2 shows the long-term mechanism of the intergenerational teaching and learning approach using service-learning projects. In the first year (t_0), MBA students will have graduated and left the

university and entered the business world. These students are then meant to sponsor projects for the next generation of MBA students in t_1. Over the years the number of MBA students will increase who would have completed the marketing course as a required element of their MBA studies and consequently have worked on a marketing group project. This will increase the pool of potential project companies with MBA alumni having the knowledge and experience which they can pass on to the next generation (cohort) of students.

FIGURE 2
LONG-TERM MECHANISM FOR ISL IN A MBA MARKETING COURSE

CONCLUSION: BENEFITS AND FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Feedback obtained from the students indicate that the concept of ISL was perceived as a positive element of the course. For example, one student commented: "Very supportive company rep[resentative]. [He/she] understood that the target audience was [the] lecturer as well as [the] company." The value of this approach is that it reduced friction between lecturer, students and companies due to the sponsor's better understanding of student needs based on their own experience with MBA projects as former students. For instance, sponsors can relate to the students' work schedule and are more willing to accommodate the team with regard to meetings (e.g., "He also gave us a lot of flexibility with meeting times because he knew from experience how difficult it can be for part timers and full timers to get together"). More specifically, the sponsors may have a better understanding of the project outcomes and thus are able to communicate their expectations more clearly. For instance, a student commented: "I think the main benefit is that the sponsor had a real appreciation of what we were going through as MBA students. They had appreciation for our time, were realistic with their expectations about what we could produce for a report given our timeframes and experience." This increased the comfort zone of students knowing that their sponsor has gone through the same process previously.

Nevertheless, there are a few issues which may have to be addressed in the future. Oral mid-project company feedback indicated that some students should have communicated more with the company representatives. Some students had an initial meeting with their company and then 'resurfaced' at the end of the project without any company touch points during the two-months period not making good use of the company mentor. Certain representatives were not very satisfied with the project outcome and indicated that they would not be willing to continue this cooperation. This had significant implications for the lecturer, the college and ultimately the university in regard to reputation and brand image. From a student point of view some students perceived shortcomings in regard to the availability of the company representatives: "[We] had difficulty arranging meetings with [the] sponsor."

Some students indicated that the workload was too high compared to the weighting of the project of 40% of the total mark and felt overwhelmed by the expectations of the company: "The project outlook was huge and the company expected us to know everything within a short span of time." Others seemed to need more guidance and felt left alone working on the project. In addition, the variety of projects did not allow for comparable results.

In conclusion, several improvements may be worthwhile introducing when repeating the ISL concept, but for the next iteration with fewer companies, or only one firm. This will allow for better comparability of the presentations and reports and will reduce the workload of the instructor significantly. For students and companies, additional instructions should be given. First, expectations with regard to regular meetings with the project sponsor and the instructor should be made clear and standards set, i.e., the number of required meetings both with sponsor and instructor have to be defined. Second, periodic feedback should be sought from the company representatives. Third, the role of (preferably) the MBA alumni sponsoring the project may have to be highlighted more clearly. Students seem to not have fully understood the potential benefits of working together with a former MBA student. Finally, it may be worth discussing with the company representatives how willing they would be to take over a more mentor-like role when sponsoring the projects.

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