

INTEGRATING EXTENDED EXPERIENTIAL GROUP LEARNING PROJECTS INTO UNDERGRADUATE MARKETING CLASSES: OBSERVATIONS, PROCESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Brad Sago, Hult International Business School

ABSTRACT

For a decade and a half, the author has integrated experiential learning into marketing and business classes with the goal of deepening student learning of concepts and theories, as well as, promote the use by students of theories and concepts into situational analyses and development of relevant resulting recommendations. The focus of this article is to discuss the purposes, processes, outcomes and challenges of integrating an extended group experiential learning project – one lasting approximately 12 weeks – into an upper division undergraduate semester-based marketing class. The results of these experiential projects were well received by both students and their business clients.

JEL: M00, M31

KEYWORDS: Experiential Learning, Teaching Pedagogy, Experiential Projects, Group Assignment
Grading Fairness

INTRODUCTION

While lectures are the most often used delivery method of content in undergraduate education (Fulford, 2013), the increased focus on experiential learning has been significant in the last several decades as influenced by Kolb's early work on the modern theories of experiential learning and further built on the writings of Dewey, Lewin and Paiget (Neilsen-Englyst, 2003).

Integrating experiential learning “can be challenging, surprising, frustrating, and ultimately rewarding” for educators (Kolb, Kolb, Passarelli & Sharma, 2014, p. 205). The author has found agreement with this statement and will share specific experiences and lessons found while implementing larger scoped experiential projects into undergraduate marketing classes.

Over ten consecutive fall semesters, my Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) class teamed with students from the college's Art Department to form IMC “consulting firms” to work with local businesses with a focus of positively impacting the clients' sales and other marketing objectives. The students from my class formed 3-4 person marketing teams and were then joined by 1 or 2 “creatives” from the Art class. Typically, the number of total teams ranged from 5 to 7 per each fall semester. By the end of the semester, the client was presented a custom IMC plan, as well as, an array of creative materials designed especially for their plan.

Although undertaking such an experiential learning experience seemed like a good idea from the start, I had little idea how positively it would be accepted by students and the greater business community surrounding the university.

This article contributes to related literature in several ways. First, a process of integrating a semester-long experiential learning project with actual business clients is detailed. Second, a multi-stage process to increase the accountability and widespread participation of individual students in experiential team projects is offered. Finally, information is offered as to how an experiential learning project can integrate business students with non-business students to enhance student experience related to working in broad functional teams.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential learning is an environment that brings students into a situation where they, as learners, participate in an active manner in the acquisition of information and knowledge (Cannon & Feinstein, 2005) with the pedagogical objective of linking learned theory with practice (Perrin, 2014). Austin and Rust (2015) stated that experiential learning is by nature hands-on learning that can be provided by numerous methodologies including projects, internships, co-ops, study abroad and experiential activities.

An objective of using experiential learning by educators is to improve student learning of knowledge and skills (Green & Farazmand, 2012) as experiential learning moves students into a more engaged state in the learning process (Wharton & Parry, 2003). Kolb and Kolb (2005) found that many educational programs are more focused on a more memorization learning style than programs that also allow learners opportunities to learn by putting what has been learned into action via an experiential learning component. Research by Maher and Hughner (2005) showed students evaluate experiential learning in a favorable manner. Experiential learning activities with real clients give students significant opportunity to try out their communication skills as well as learn by doing (Hagan, 2012). Sanchez-Romaguera and Phillips (2018) identified the benefits to students of experiential education include a higher level of problem solving and an increased ownership of responsibility for their own learning.

Four overall routes to management learning can be identified: action, cognition, reflection and experience (Kayes, 2002). Zull (2002) found that the learning cycle can be more fully completed when learning through internal reflection is brought into contact with experiences. Benefits for students from experiential learning include higher student intellectual achievements (Knobloch, 2003). Research by Warnick, Schmidt and Bowden (2014) showed experiential learning is an effective route to the development of student cognitive skills. While increasing the relevancy of content, experiential learning also promotes student critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making (Hodge, Proudford & Holt, 2014) and can provide students the chance to apply, integrate and build their knowledge (Bristow, Harris, Gulati & Schneider, 2014).

Research also shows that the benefits of experiential learning are varied and go beyond student intellectual achievement. Experiential learning projects increase the self-confidence of many participants (Charlebois & Giberson, 2009) and students feel increased confidence and optimism regarding the quality of their work (Cano, Lidon, Rebollar, Roman & Saenz, 2006). Students often show significant levels of involvement in experiential projects (Elam & Spotts, 2004). In an environment of increased competition for students, colleges and universities can positively differentiate themselves from many institutions by offering relevant experiential learning opportunities may provide a positive differentiation between institutions (Roberts, 2018).

Experiential learning has been found to have “a positive, significant effect on student learning and student’s perception of learning” (Burch et al, 2014, p. 282) including increased student interest in life-long learning (Jiusto & DiBiasio, 2006). Baird (2018) found that students often described immersive experiential learning opportunities as transformative. Quesada-Pineda, Adams and Hammett (2017) identified that students in programs featuring a combination of teacher-centered and experiential learning felt engaged, empowered and could apply their experiences in different situations and contexts while Karimova

and Rutti (2018) found that the combination of lectures and experiential learning assisted students in applying classroom topics to actual business environments. Experiential learning with real clients in an international setting has been found to provide a higher level of student understanding of their work process and results, their prospective professions and the international settings (Vaz & Pedersen, 2002).

Austin and Rust's (2015) study of a university experiential course program found that while engaging students in their learning, faculty are engaged in their teaching. Austin and Rust further stated that experiential learning programs can have a positive impact on campus's overall learning culture.

METHODOLOGY

While teaching marketing in a school of business at a university in the Northwest United States, I began integrating an experiential project into a junior/senior level undergraduate Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) course. Teaming with the Digital Imaging undergraduate course from the university's Art Department, student teams were formed to create "promotional agencies". Each student promotional agency worked with an actual local small business. Students in the IMC classes assumed account management duties that dealt with researching the client firms, customers, competitors and marketing efforts and then developing customized integrated marketing communications plans. Students in the Digital Imaging classes developed the actual creative outputs such as print advertisements, promotional materials, web site mock-ups (actual websites were not developed as part of this project), point of purchase materials and sales promotion pieces. The entire project took approximately 12 of the semester's 14 weeks and ended with teams presenting the formal IMC plans and creative deliverables to their clients.

The timeline and process for this project had several stages that stretched across the semester. First, the project was detailed to students and then students self-selected into IMC teams. Next after instructor pre-approval of prospective clients, each team was responsible for securing their own business. Third, student teams analyzed the client's previous marketing related efforts, customers and competition and then developed specific IMC strategies, tactics and budgets. At this point and based on the IMC plan developed by account management, the creative team developed the actual IMC pieces. At the conclusion of the semester, the integrated teams presented their plans and creative output to the clients through a visual presentation and hardcopy of the entire IMC plan including schedules and budgets.

RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

This experiential learning group project presented benefits, and also challenges, for the students, faculty and businesses involved. The challenges within groups will be discussed in additional detail later in this section.

A common student reaction when the project was introduced to the class at the beginning of the semester was "how do we know enough about IMC to be able to help a real business?". However, by the end of the semester students came to appreciate that their IMC plans were relevant, useful, appreciated and valued by their clients. The resulting benefits to students came from 5 main areas: (1) students gained experience in the "real" business world; (2) students gained confidence in their professional skills; (3) students gained confidence from realizing the information gained through business classes could be actually relevant and useful to their professional lives; (4) students gained experience in working in cross-functional groups; and, (5) students gained experience worthy of including on their resumes – and students reported prospective internship providers and/or employers often favorably commented on this project.

There were also several significant benefits from the faculty perspective including (1) students learned from their peers through working together and critiquing and developing each other's work; (2) students tended to take the project very seriously – much more so than with case studies, fictional scenarios, etc. – due to working for real-world clients; and, (3) students gained significant experience in analyzing situations and then developing appropriate turn-key recommendations appropriate for client budgets and customers.

This type of experiential learning also presented challenges to students within individual teams. The challenges from the student perspective fell into two main categories. First, and similar to other types of team assignments, students found that some of their teammates did not participate equally. To promote more consistent student involvement within teams, I developed a grading procedure that involved peer grading within each student team across multiple stages of the project that could result in different grades for students in the same group. An example of how this was done was to ask students in every group to divide 100 points among group members based on productivity and quality of work of the assigned portion of the project. The hope from the instructor's point of view would be for each student to get the same amount of points (e.g., 25 points each if 4 members were one the team, 20 for a 5-person team, etc.). If there was a significant difference among the scores groups would be notified of the situation and tasked to an agreement of the percentage each member earned on the assignment's grade.

For example, a group earned 86/100 points on a portion of the project but peer grading indicated significant differences in how much each student did as well as the quality of work done. Before informing the team the grade on the assignment, the team had to come to a collective agreement – with all signing off – on what percentage each member would receive based on each student's performance. For this scenario, let's say there was agreement within the team that 3 students earned 100% and a student who did less work an 80%. Therefore, the students would receive scores of 86, 86, 86 and 68.4 respectively. Overall students received this grading system well as grades better reflected the actual quality and quantity of individual student contributions to the assignment.

Another challenge for some student groups was that this project required planning and preparation. The importance of time management came into focus as some aspects of the project – like meeting with clients and group members – did not lend themselves well to last minute “cramming” and writing reports the night before the due date.

The most significant faculty challenge revolved around the additional time and energy needed to have a class undertake such an experiential project. Often being their first type of such assignment, students ask more questions and request insights and guidance. Reviewing and grading segments of the project early in the semester took more time as students were less familiar with business report style writing (though that had been covered in class with multiple examples provided on the class online management site). Finally, many students needed encouragement and guidance related to analyzing an aspect of the client's marketing efforts and then developing custom, detailed recommendations for improvement of the area.

The main challenge expressed by client businesses was the carving out the time to meet with IMC teams. However, the consensus was that the time for those meetings were well worth the benefits of receiving the IMC Plan and supporting materials for their businesses.

ASSESSMENT

While no business client actually implemented an entire IMC plan, it was common for numerous recommendations from plans to be adopted. In fact, in multiple occasions, clients began implementing marketing strategies and tactics being developed the student teams prior to the project's completion and submission.

Client post-project feedback regularly mentioned the quality of analysis and resulting recommendations and creative work. Clients frequently said that they were so occupied with day-to-day operations that they did not have time or energy to devote to such detailed planning.

Client views of the this experiential learning experience were manifested in additional ways including (A) no client ever expressed regret in working with the students or the marketing plans; (B) the number of previous clients wanting to work with student teams again after a couple of years was high enough that a “3 year between client renewals” policy was developed so more businesses in the area could benefit from the student work; (C) positive word-of-mouth from the client business’ was such that local firms started to contact the instructor in order to get on the future client list; and (D) several clients retained members of their student teams post-project in (usually paid) marketing intern positions to implement the marketing plans that the teams developed.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I have found integrating extended experiential projects where students work with real business clients into classes time consuming and sometimes a hassle – especially when sorting out group dynamics was necessary. However, I am confident the benefits to the students worth such inconveniences. Perhaps the best judgment of these extended experiential projects came from the students themselves years after graduation as it is not uncommon for former students to let me know that looking back they found the group IMC Plan project engaging, memorable, relevant and valuable.

REFERENCES

- Austin, M.J., & Rust, D.Z. (2015). Developing an experiential learning program: Milestones and challenges. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 27(1), 141-153.
- Braid, B. (2018). Majoring in the Minor: A Closer Look at Experiential Learning. *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 285. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip/285>.
- Bristow, D., Harris, G., Gulati, R., & Schneider, K. (2014). Sixty-seven students, one baseball park and eight hundred fans: Experiential learning in marketing. *Atlantic Marketing Journal*, 3(2) Summer, 113-128.
- Burch, G.F., Batchelor, J.H., Heller, N.A., Shaw, J., Kendall, W. & Turner, B. (2014). Experiential learning – What do we know? A meta-analysis of 40 years of research. *Developments in Business Simulations and Experiential Learning*, 41, 279-283.
- Cannon, H.M. & Feinstein, A.H. (2005). Bloom beyond Bloom: Using the revised taxonomy to develop experiential learning strategies. *Developments in Business Simulations and Experiential Learning*, 32, 348-356.
- Cano, J.L., Lidon, I., Rebollar, R., Roman, P. & Saenz, M.J. (2006). Student groups solving real-life projects: A case study of experiential learning. *International Journal of Engineering Education*, 22(6), 1252-1260.
- Charlebois, S. & Giberson, R. (2009). From classroom to boardroom: How international marketing students earn their way to experiential learning opportunities and the case of the “Beyond Borders of a Classroom” program. *International Journal of Education*, 1(1), 1-14.

- Elam, E.L.R. & Spotts, H.E. (2004). Achieving marketing curriculum integration: A live case study approach. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 26(1), 50-65.
- Fulford, M.D. (2013). Practice what you preach: Using an experiential learning approach to teach leadership. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics*, 10(2), 81-86.
- Green, R.D. & Farazmand, F.A. (2012). Experiential learning: The internship and live-case study relationship. *Business Education & Accreditation*, 4(1), 13-23.
- Hagan, L.M. (2012). Fostering experiential learning and service through client projects in graduate business courses offered online. *American Journal of Business Education*, 5(5) September/October, 623-632.
- Hodge, L., Proudford, K.L. & Holt, H. Jr. (2014). From periphery to core: The increasing relevance of experiential learning in undergraduate business education. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 26 October, 1-5.
- Justo, S. & DiBiasio, D. (2006). Experiential learning environments: Do they prepare our students to be self-directed, life-long learners. *Journal of Engineering Education*, July, 195-204.
- Karimova, G. Z. & Rutti, R. (2018). Experiential interdisciplinary approach to teaching: A case of collaboration between entrepreneurship and media production. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education*, 21(1). Retrieved from <https://www.abacademies.org/articles/experiential-interdisciplinary-approach-to-teaching-a-case-of-collaboration-between-entrepreneurship-and-media-production-7006.html>.
- Kayes, D.C. (2002). Experiential learning and its critics: Preserving the role of experience in management and education. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 1(2), 137-149.
- Knobloch, N.A. (2003). Is experiential learning authentic? *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 44(4), 22-34.
- Kolb, A.Y. & Kolb, D.A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4(2), 193-212.
- Kolb, A.Y., Kolb, D.A., Passarelli, A. & Sharma, G. (2014). On becoming an experiential educator: The educator role profile. *Simulation & Gaming*, 45(2), 204-234.
- Maher, J.K. & Hughner, R.S. (2005). Experiential learning projects: Student perceptions of live case and simulated methods. *Journal of Advancement of Marketing Education*, 7 Winter, 1-10.
- Nielsen-Englyst, L. (2003). Game design for imaginative conceptualization. *Proceedings of the International Workshop on Experiential Interactive Learning in Industrial Management*. Allborg, Denmark, 149-164.
- Perrin, J. (2014). Features of engaging and empowering experiential learning programs for college students. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 11(2) 1-12. Retrieved from <http://ro.vow.edu.au/jutlp/vol11/iss2/2>.
- Quesada-Pineda, H. J., Adams, E. & Hammett, A. L. T. (2017). Incorporating Experiential Teaching Methods in Sustainable Natural Resources Curriculum: A Case Study. In: A Collection of Case Studies, ASA, Madison, WI. p. 167-176. doi:10.4195/jnrlse.2010.0035u.

Roberts, J. (2018). From the Editor: The Possibilities and Limitations of Experiential Learning Research in Higher Education. *Journal of Experiential Learning*, 41(1) 3-7. Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1053825917751457>.

Sanchez-Romaguera, V. & Phillips, R. A. (2018). A comparison of a first and final year UG enterprise unit: Lessons from experiential learning and interdisciplinarity. *4th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'18)* Universitat Politecnica de Valencia, Valencia, 2018. Retrieved from <http://www.headconf.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/8110.pdf>.

Vaz, R.F. & Pedersen, P.C. (2002). Experiential learning with global perspective: Overseas senior design projects. *Proceedings of the 32rd ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference*, November 6-9, Boston, MA, S3B1-S3B4.

Warnick, G.M., Schmidt, J. & Bowden, A.E. (2014). An experiential learning approach to develop leadership competencies in engineers and technologies students. *Proceedings of the 2014 ASEE Annual Conference*, June, Indianapolis, IN. Retrieved from http://www.asee.org/file_server/papers/attachment/file/0004/5050/An_Experiential_Learning_Approach_to_Develop_Leadership_Compencies_in_Engineers.pdf.

Wharton, R. & Parry, L.E. (2003). The good, the bad, and the ugly: Using experiential learning in the classroom. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning*, 3(23), 56-68.

Zull, J.E. (2002). *The art of changing the brain: Enriching teaching by exploring the biology of learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

BIOGRAPHY

Brad Sago, D.B.A., is a Professor of Marketing at Hult International Business School (Boston campus) in Cambridge, MA, USA.