

Creating Experiential Learning In The Graduate Classroom Through Community Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Educators can provide opportunities for active learning for the students by engaging them in client-based projects with the community, which enhances application of theory and provides students with the relevance demanded from the business community. Experiential learning opportunities through client-based projects provide for such an experience. Students in a graduate research methods class worked in teams to conduct a SWOT analysis for a local non-profit organization. This paper discusses the use of cooperative learning teams to engage in experiential learning with a non-profit.

Keywords: experiential learning, community engagement, graduate teaching, research methods

INTRODUCTION

Students find that entering into graduate school is a new world from the undergraduate experience. The expectations for writing skills and research conducted for papers is at a much higher level than what occurred at the undergraduate level. This introduction to the graduate experience often begins with a research methods course in order to familiarize students with foundational information they will need for later courses. Students need to familiarize themselves with databases in order to collect secondary information for many types of industry analyses.

Research methods courses can use a variety of techniques to develop students' abilities. These range from literature reviews, case analyses, survey development, and writing research proposals. This paper will discuss how students in a graduate research methods course met with staff from a local non-profit performing arts venue to conduct a situation analysis and make recommendations to the organization based on their research.

THE NEED FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE GRADUATE CLASSROOM

Students have a desire for practical application of theoretical knowledge to the workplace (Benajmin & O'Reilly, 2011). Student attention in lectures tends to drop after only 10 to 30 minutes in typical courses (Young, Robinson, & Alberts, 2009). Students and businesses expect to learn by doing in the classroom rather than by being mere recipients of lecture (Barr & Tagg 1995; Bisoux, 2011, Cherney, 2008; Graeff, 2010; McHann & Frost; Myers, 2010). Experiential learning is the "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Kolb proposes a four stage iterative model of experiential learning concrete experience, observation and reflection, forming new abstract concepts and testing the new concepts (Kolb, 1984). The instructor's role in the cycle is as a facilitator to engage students in research, reflection and decision making that will put theory into practice.

Experiential learning takes active learning a step further by incorporating reflection into the experience (Kolb, 1984). Students learn abstract concepts and apply the ideas to new situations through cases, projects, or activities (Kolb 1981 & 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Munoz et. al., 2008; Myers, 2010). The process of experiential

learning involves research, creativity, decision making and problem solving and includes adaptive activities (Kolb, 1984). Kolb describes experiential learning as a process that is ongoing.

Experiential learning needs to be encouraged in graduate programs. Kolb and Kolb (2005) found in a study of 1286 MBA students that management courses compared to art programs focused more on telling students (straight lecturing) versus showing (demonstrating) about concepts and theory and “ spent little time on student performance” (p. 203) . Time students spent performing (doing) was on their exams and quizzes. The conclusion was that MBA faculty who were more specialized and focused on abstract learning orientation than art faculty. Kolb and Kolb (2005) recommended that MBA courses “make space” in class time to include discussions on students experiences, conversational learning, and reflecting. Other studies examining graduate courses have also identified the need for experiential learning in the graduate classroom (Bisoux, 2011; McHann & Frost).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PROJECTS

Educators who choose to work with real clients are fully committing themselves to the experiential learning process. It does take some consideration as time and effort is involved. Finding the right client(s), communicating before and during the semester about the project and ensuring feedback is provided to students are essential components to the learning process (Lopez & Lee, 2005; Melton & Hicks, 2011, Strauss, 2011).

These projects engage students in the business community for both profit and non-profit organizations. Jacoby (1996) defines service learning as

a form of experimental education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development; service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity change both the recipient and provider of the service. (p. 5).

Students connect with the community and provide a service such as an analysis, report or social media communications (Godfrey, Illes & Berry, 2005; Crews, & Stitt-Gohdes, 2012; Mahin & Kruggel, 2006; Metcalf, 2010). Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley and Colby (2006) analyzed service-learning projects across nine schools to suggest a framework for successful service learning which included achieving personal insight, understanding of social issues and application of skills. Providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their espoused values is an essential component to the service learning process (Eyler, 2002; Kolenko et. al, 2006; Molee, Henry, Sessa, & McKinney-Prupis, 2010). Kolenko et. al. (2006), found that most service learning projects focused on exposure of or raising consciousness to social issues. While many schools focus on having students engage in activities that assist the community, such as writing a business plan, many factors such as limited resources could inhibit the implementation by students.

Reflection is a vital component to both the experiential and service learning processes (Eyler, 2002). Molee, Henry, Sessa, & McKinney-Prupis (2010) propose a model to assess service learning through critical reflection on their personal experience. Their DEAL model is based on students “(a) **D**escribing their service-learning experience, to (b) **E**xamining this experience in light of specified learning objectives for *academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement*, to (c) **A**rticulating their **L**earning in their reflections” (Molee et al, p. 241). The model incorporates the levels of critical thinking espoused by Bloom (1956) into its learning objectives and guided reflective questions. Models or reflective activities such as this should be included to assess the full experience of students.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Cooperative learning allows students to work in teams to share ideas and experiences (Johnson, Johnson & Johnson Holubec, 1995; Panitz, 2001). Using teams and cooperative learning experiences is common practice in business courses (Cavanagh, 2011; Laverie, 2006; Lightner, Marcie & Willi, 2007; Munoz & Huser, 2008; Wichadee & Orawiwantakul, 2012). Pontius and Harper (2006) include active learning and facilitating cooperative learning amongst their principles for successful graduate student engagement. Successful cooperative learning

includes (a) positive interdependence where the group works towards a common goal; (b) face-to-face group interactions that encourage participation; (c) individual and group accountability where group members divide the work; (d) intergroup social skill such as decision-making, trust building, communication and conflict management; and (e) time to work in small groups (Johnson, Johnson & Johnson Holubec, 1995).

EXECUTING THE PROJECT

The Client

The project begins with the selection of the client. Clients must be willing to communicate with the instructor before, during the semester, and with the students throughout the semester. Nonprofit organizations often seek assistance as they seldom have the budget to do all needed work and appreciate the work of students. Lopez and Lee (2005) give advice for working with client based projects including setting high expectations, providing timely and productive feedback and planning in advance of the course.

In the graduate research methods course the client was a non-profit, performing arts center that needed assistance with increasing attendance. Executives from the organization worked with the instructor prior to class to ensure that the scope of the project was within the realm of the research course. On the first day of class, one executive spoke to the students to position the problem/opportunity for the student, provide background information, and contact information. Executives returned to the class to provide feedback on the students' analyses and recommendations.

Instructors can find their clients through many sources such as networking, colleagues, or Small Business Institutes or Community Outreach Programs at Institutions. In this course, the connection came through a colleague.

The Course and Project

The course for the student project was a graduate level research methods course. Students in the course consisted of Masters of Business Administration, Masters of Public and Nonprofit Administration and Masters of Management Information Systems. As one of their assignments for the course, students conducted a SWOT analysis on the non-profit organization. The instructor trained the students in searching for information on non-profits in class, as well as on how to conduct database research and interviewing. While the interviewing was not required for the SWOT analysis assignment, several teams conducted personal interviews as they were fully engaged in the project.

The instructor allowed some use of class time for students to form teams, meet, and receive feedback from the instructor about the project. A formal written analysis was due to the client in week five of the course in order for the client to give feedback in week six.

Teams

While there are multiple avenues for forming teams, teams self-selected based on individual profile discussions on the first day of class. Individuals completed profiles of their life and work experiences, which they shared with the class before forming teams. Teams were a mix of the majors.

Team Charter and Evaluations

Team members complete a brief charter to assign responsibilities to each team member. The charter includes a work schedule where they gave estimated deadlines for the project tasks in order that students hold themselves and each other accountable. The instructor informed team members at the beginning of the course, that individual would complete team evaluations as part of their cooperative/experiential learning experience and that this is part of their grade and learning experience.

Client Feedback

Three executives from the non-profit came to the class during week six of the course to provide feedback to the students. This process took approximately two hours of class time with the feedback being interactive amongst the team, class, professor and executives. The executives commented on the SWOT analyses and asked questions about the students' conclusions and recommendations. Student reflections indicated that this was the most beneficial time of the process as they were able to ascertain the effectiveness of their analyses and recommendations.

Instructor Feedback

The instructor provided feedback to the students on their progress throughout the week course as students met in groups, via office meetings, and email about the project. The instructor met with the students in class and online to discuss the analyses and provided formal written feedback on the paper.

Student Reflections

Students' reflecting on their experience was overall positive. They enjoyed putting their knowledge into practice. The students commented on understanding on identifying problems, conducting secondary research and making specific recommendations that are actionable. While most students enjoyed the cooperative learning experience, a few indicated they would have preferred to work individually given the time constraint of the class (ten weeks).

CONCLUSION

Students in both undergraduate and graduate classes appreciate experiential learning as they become more active learners. As students engage with the community and receive feedback from individuals at organizations about the relevancy of their work to practice, they connect with the theory and the community. While client based service learning projects take more coordination and time on the part of the instructor, the enhanced experience for the student results in active learning and critical thought (Kolenko et. al, 1996; Myers, 2010).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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NOTES