

## Student Perceptions on Live-Case Projects: Undergraduate Marketing Research

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This paper is an investigation into undergraduate students' perceptions on use of live projects as a teaching pedagogy in marketing research courses. Students in undergraduate marketing research courses from fall 2009 to spring 2013 completed an online questionnaire consisting of 17 items. The results suggested that student understanding of marketing research as a subject matter was significantly improved. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research, confirming the value of blending theory with practice. Specifically, this study found live-case projects were perceived by students to improve: (1) analytical skills, (2) understanding of subject matter, (3) critical thinking, (4) a comprehensive understanding of the research process; and (5) being engaged/active participants in class and in a more macro basis in their own education.

Live-case projects have gained increased interest in teaching marketing research courses during the past decade (Bove & Davies, 2009). This is because of the following reasons: (1) the gap between theory and application as realized by practitioners and academicians (Stern & Tseng, 2002), (2) more emphasis on theory than on practical applications (de los Santos & Jensen, 1985), and (3) lack of student preparation for marketing careers (Day, 1979; MacKay, 1979; Marshak & De Groot, 1978; Osthiemer, 1977; Peters, 1980). Employers seek professionals who have developed the ability to identify problems, seek relevant data/information, analyze and interpret data, make a decision and in, essence, solve real-world problems (Wilkins, 2000). Accrediting agencies suggest incorporating real-world learning experiences into business curricula. Further, educators are striving to bridge the gap between theory and practice by providing their students opportunities to apply the theoretical concepts to real-world business situations (Granitz, 2001; Kolb, 1984; Nofz, 1990; Schibrowsky & Peltier, 1995; Stern & Tseng, 2002).

### Literature Review

Researchers have verified a significant gap between theory and application in marketing (Stern & Tseng, 2002). However, this gap between theory and application is not limited to marketing alone. It is also prevalent in other business disciplines such as accounting (Gribbin, Kames, & King, 1995), human resource management (Lewis & Ducharme, 1990), MIS (Ahmadi & Brabston, 1997) and production and operations management (Levenburg, 1996). Live-case projects can reduce this gap between theory and application (Humphreys, 1981; Lopez & Lee, 2005; Ramocki, 1987).

### Experiential Learning

Kolb (1984) defined learning as a "process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience" (p. 41). Traditionally, academicians have relied on lectures to foster student learning (Kennedy, Lawton, & Walker, 2001). However, this teaching method is criticized for not stimulating the critical thinking and communication skills necessary for students to be successful in business on graduation (Munoz & Huser, 2008).

Keeton and Tate (1978) defined experiential learning as learning in which the learner is in direct touch with the studied realities. Past research has identified several critical ingredients needed for experiential learning, such as being interactive with the student community, company personnel and the faculty, as well as—most importantly—keeping contact with, and exposing students to, the real-world scenario (Gentry, 1990).

Experiential learning involves students with an experience and promotes reflecting on the experience (Frontczak & Kelley, 2000), whereas lecture-based classes promote passive learning (Kennedy et al., 2001) and leave students little time for reflection (Civi & Persinger, 2011). Experiential learning also helps foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Kennedy et al., 2001), and it positively impacts student learning (Warren, 2012). Researchers suggested using experiential learning in the marketing curriculum (Bridges, 1999; de los Santos & Jensen, 1985; Graeff, 1997; O'Hara & Shaffer, 1995; Wynd, 1989) and found experiential learning to increase levels of student involvement, understanding and information retention (Bridges, 1999; Drafke, Schoenbachler, & Gordon, 1996; Gruca, 2000; Hamer, 2000; Petkus, 2000; Specht, 1985). A more recent experiential learning technique is assigning live-case projects to students (Roth & Smith, 2009).

### Live-Case Projects

Also known as client-initiated or client-sponsored projects, live-case projects need a business willing to work with students to undertake market research. The business introduces the project, supports the research and provides feedback on the results. Students present a report to the client on completion of research and make an oral presentation. Occasionally, the live-case projects become important for making marketing related decisions for the client organization as they provide a fresh perspective for the client organization (Browne, 1979; Jones, 1982; Richardson & Raveed, 1980).

Live-case projects provide the advantages of case studies with the significant benefits of being current, accessible and available for analysis in real-time. Live-case projects also give students an opportunity to apply the theoretical to a real-world client. Hamer (2000) found that experiential methods in marketing research, such as live-case projects, develop marketing and business skills in students. This method motivates students to learn because they are given an opportunity to interact with a real client and students quickly realize that their recommendations are no longer theoretical and that these recommendations need to be justified and well-conceived as there are real outcomes associated with the implementation of the same. Live-case projects also provide students with an opportunity for collaboration and teamwork. From the student vantage point, a live-case project is even more rewarding as it results in a tangible outcome and has the potential to make a positive contribution for a local business (Matulich, Papp, & Haytko, 2008).

For academicians, live-case projects come with many benefits. Burns (1990) pointed out that realism is the key ingredient in live-case projects. Richardson and Raveed (1980) and de los Santos and Jensen (1985) said that live-case projects provide a conduit between theory and practice. Live-case projects help students integrate material taught in the classroom and provide continuity (Gremier, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000; Humphreys, 1981; Razzouk, Seitz, & Rizkallah, 2003). Bridges (1999) suggested that incorporating live-case projects into the curriculum has the added advantage of providing consistency in the students' view about the discipline of marketing because these projects are interactive, real-world, and creative.

### Purpose

Although there are multiple studies outlining the advantages of live-case projects, they are still not widely used in the classroom. Lopez and Lee (2005) pointed out the difficulty of finding good businesses with whom to work, grading challenges, and the necessary time commitment may be some of the

reasons for the general neglect in using live-case projects. This study considered these remarks, and it adds to the literature by outlining the method of implementation and feedback received for a series of live-case projects in an undergraduate marketing research course. This study is less concerned with the rationale surrounding the use of live-case projects, and instead it is focused on contributing to the literature that provides practical advice on carrying out live-case projects (Elam & Spotts, 2004; Lopez & Lee, 2005).

Granitz (2001) examined student perceptions of courses using an active project method approach to learning compared with those employing more passive techniques. Results showed that students thought active learning courses were more meaningful than courses using passive techniques. The purpose of this study is to further Granitz's (2001) findings and to seek undergraduate student's perceptions of live-case projects in a marketing research course taught in a small US Midwest state university.

## Method

### Participants

Participants in the study consisted of students who were enrolled in an undergraduate marketing research course during fall 2009 to spring 2013, totaling eight sections. The number of students who took the course over the 4 year period was 143. Forty-seven of these students responded to the request for participation in this study, resulting in a response rate of 32%. Marketing Research was a four number course and was open for students who were either juniors or seniors meeting the prerequisites of the course.

### Course Structure

The eight marketing research course sections were taught by the same instructor. Each section had the same number and hours of class meetings, concept delivery (i.e., lecture and discussion), and course expectations on grading and assignments. On the first day of class, students were formed into groups of five or six students for a project that would encompass the entire semester.

Malhotra, Tashchian, and Jain (1989) outlined the operational issues when using a project method approach in a marketing research course. They are considered in developing the project. Specifically, during the months before the beginning of a semester, the instructor sought potential clients from local businesses. The instructor chose a client for each group. The instructor asked the clients to visit the class and discuss their marketing problem with the students.

As the semester progressed, students worked in groups through the various phases of the marketing

research. The project involved six distinct phases (Bove & Davies, 2009): (1) sourcing the client, (2) writing the research proposal, (3) designing the questionnaire, (4) collecting and analyzing data, (5) writing the research report, and (6) presenting the report to the client.

Each group's members conducted exploratory research and defined their marketing research problem. They became familiar with the use of secondary data and qualitative research. The course content provided them with information on potential research designs. In designing their research, groups used different methods. They collected data from their designed sample. The groups analyzed the data using SPSS or any other software according to their preference. After data analysis, the groups drew conclusions and analyzed the marketing implications from this analysis. The projects ended with formal presentations to classmates, instructor and client.

### Measure and Procedure

A questionnaire was developed based on those used by Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, and Mayo (2000) and Chapman and van Auken (2001) to examine students' project perceptions and learning. The questionnaire consisted of 17 items measuring students' perceptions. A sample item is, "My understanding of marketing research was enhanced." Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (anchored by 5 = *strongly agree*, 1 = *strongly disagree*).

An e-mail invitation was sent to all the students to take part in the study by completing a survey within a set period of time. The e-mail explained that the purpose of this study was to seek their perceptions on live-case projects. Students were asked to express honest, anonymous responses as their input would be instrumental in deciding whether to continue to use this method in teaching marketing research. The survey was sent online using Qualtrics.

### Results

Survey responses were mixed. Most students agreed or strongly agreed that their live-case project allowed them to gain firsthand experience of project execution and to use technical and analytical concepts and skills learned in class. Most students also said their understanding of marketing research, data collection, the needs of effective reporting of research results and the role of market research in business-decision making was improved. However, student responses were more evenly divided in response to the items, "My understanding of how to evaluate the tools necessary for gathering accurate information in an efficient, timely, and cost-effective manner was enhanced" and "This project gave me an opportunity to successfully convince a client organization of the worth of my

contribution to their organization." Overall, students agreed or strongly agreed they collected and analyzed data, and that their critical thinking skills were improved because of the live-case project.

Most students strongly agreed or agreed the live-case project was more productive and enjoyable than listening to a lecture and that it provided stronger motivation to work harder toward learning marketing research than a lecture. However, a subset of students did say their live-case project was not worth the effort and that it was less enjoyable compared to group projects in other business-related courses. Students' agreement was also mixed about their confidence in completing a similar project for a company in the future.

As the responses were mixed and the mean values are close to *neither agree nor disagree*, a *z* test was conducted to understand the lower and upper values for the Likert-scale responses. The *z* scores provided a greater understanding of the responses. The two items with the highest upper values were, "As a learning experience, this project was more productive than listening to a lecture" ( $M = 4.33$ ), and, "As a learning experience, this project was more enjoyable than listening to a lecture" ( $M = 4.31$ ). These results support the findings of earlier researchers (Bridges, 1999; Drafke et al., 1996; Gruca, 2000; Hamer, 2000; Petkus, 2000; Specht, 1985). The *z* scores of "I gained firsthand experience of project execution, including data collection" ( $M = 4.11$ ), "My understanding of the data collection process was enhanced" ( $M = 4.03$ ), and "My understanding of the role of marketing research in business-decision making was enhanced" ( $M = 4.00$ ) also support the findings of earlier studies and reemphasizes the benefits of incorporating experiential learning to provide students with both relevance and experience in applying theory to real-world issues. List of means, standard deviations, and *z* scores are listed in Table 1.

### Discussion and Future Research

The purpose of this study was to explore student perceptions about the live-case approach in teaching marketing research. Results of this study suggest that students' opinions on the practical or realistic nature of the project remained high. Live-case projects are used in marketing courses to provide students with the opportunity to use or experience learned concepts, which eventually improves the overall learning. The findings of this study add to the body of evidence that clearly suggest student's positive disposition toward live-case projects and their perception of an enhanced learning experience in courses using live projects.

In line with Kennedy et al. (2001), students said the live-case project was more productive and more enjoyable than listening to a lecture and reported improved critical thinking skills because of the project.

Table 1  
*Student Perceptions on the Client-Sponsored Projects*

Statements	SD	D	NAD	A	SA	M	SD	z interval test	
								Lower	Upper
My understanding of marketing research was enhanced.	5	4	7	26	5	3.47	1.14	3.14	3.79
My understanding of the data collection process was enhanced.	3	4	6	25	9	3.70	1.08	3.36	4.03
I gained firsthand experience of project execution, including data collection.	4	2	6	23	12	3.79	1.14	3.46	4.11
This project allowed me to practically implement technical/analytical concepts and skills learned in my classes.	5	4	8	23	7	3.49	1.18	3.15	3.82
My understanding of the requirements of effective reporting of research results was enhanced.	3	6	12	16	9	3.48	1.15	3.14	3.81
My understanding of the role of market research in business-decision making was enhanced.	3	4	9	20	11	3.68	1.13	3.35	4.00
My understanding of how to evaluate the tools necessary for gathering accurate information in an efficient, timely, and cost-effective manner was enhanced.	4	7	13	15	8	3.34	1.19	3.00	3.67
I used data analysis techniques to interpret the data collected and make appropriate decisions.	4	5	7	22	9	3.57	1.18	3.23	3.90
This project gave me an opportunity to successfully convince a client organization of the worth of my contribution to their organization.	9	4	11	15	7	3.15	1.35	2.76	3.53
This project improved my critical thinking skills.	4	5	12	17	9	3.47	1.18	3.13	3.80
The learning experience provided by this project was not worth the effort.	2	13	6	13	13	3.47	1.28	3.10	3.83
Having completed this project, I feel confident that I could complete this type of project for a company.	5	5	11	17	8	3.39	1.22	3.03	3.74
As a learning experience, this project was more productive than listening to a lecture.	1	2	5	23	15	4.07	0.90	3.80	4.33
As a learning experience, this project was more enjoyable than listening to a lecture.	1	2	6	21	15	4.04	0.93	3.76	4.31
This project gave me stronger motivation to work hard at learning than listening to lectures does.	1	8	8	18	11	3.65	1.10	3.33	3.96
Compared to group projects in other business-related courses, this project was more productive.	8	3	16	15	5	3.13	1.23	2.77	3.48
Compared to group projects in other business-related courses, this project was less enjoyable.	3	13	9	11	11	3.30	1.28	2.93	3.66

Note. SD = *strongly disagree*; D = *disagree*; NAD = *neither agree nor disagree*; A = *agree*; SA = *strongly agree*.

Also, students reported an increase in their skill of relating theory taught in the classroom to practice in the real world, which is essential in business education. However, students who undertook projects in other courses did not feel the live project in marketing research is in any way more productive than other projects they did in other business courses. Further, students suggested that this project was less enjoyable, which supports the findings of Maher and Hughner (2005).

### Benefits

Live-case projects in the marketing research subject provide many benefits. Lecturer benefits in the project can be excitement, novelty, and, therefore, intellectual stimulation. Students from the course get skills that businesses consider to be intrinsically valuable. These include the ability to conceptualize and define marketing research problems: to design research projects; to collect, analyze, and interpret data; and to present the findings in a way that is attractive to managers.

Marketing educators use experiential marketing projects in their undergraduate marketing classes as they believe these projects are worthwhile. However, integration of live-case projects requires dedication, coordination, resources, and above all a time commitment from the instructor and the students. In addition, the potential for problems exists when students who have differing priorities and levels of responsibility leave the instructor to personally ensure the client project is complete. As Wickliff (1989) mentioned, using live-case projects in the classroom needs instructors to be comfortable with little uncertainty and to let go some control within the classroom.

Client projects educate professors about a specific business while providing an opportunity for them to network with local business professionals and identify potential research areas. This can serve as a stepping stone to more formal relationships between the university and industry. Businesses benefit from the projects in several ways. Costs are saved since the business receives a low cost or usually a deliverable with no fiscal outlay. Businesses receive an outside vantage point, and often they can undertake a project that might have been shelved or abandoned. Students receive an opportunity to deliver high-quality work and showcase their abilities to potential employers.

### Challenges

The researchers identified several challenges since fall 2009. These challenges are not directly related to the use of live-case projects, but were related to the

difficulties in teaching marketing research to undergraduate students. As Bove and Davies (2009) pointed out, marketing students find marketing research less appealing. Time is another reason: a 15-week semester places stress on both students and instructor, as there is considerable time pressure to complete each phase of the research process. This compels students to keep abreast of the material by working ahead and usually even cover material before its being taught in class. Unlike simulated research projects, which are predictable, in live-case projects the instructor cannot plan or predict the nature of the results or the client's behavior.

Some of the other unanticipated challenges included a client's withdrawing midway because of changes in their situation. This unexpected withdrawal of the client from the project posed multiple challenges and grading issues. Also, sometimes students could not work toward the client's deadlines because of the schedules of other classes. Thus, this might lessen the motivation levels of the client and might lead to the client interacting less with the students or showing lack of enthusiasm in the research project. Therefore, students' experiences, and later perceptions, may differ widely as found in the current study.

Humphreys (1981) noted the experiential learning gained through the live-case project is "highly motivating to students, encouraging them to become active rather than passive participants in the learning process." However, the researchers noted during the time of this study that students' early motivation was lost if the client business is something the students did not like or if the research became difficult because of lack of information. It is also noted that if the client raises expectations, the students lose motivation. It is important to know that client projects are not a panacea that magically transforms the classroom into a perfect learning environment (Bush-Bacelis, 1998).

### Implications for Educators

This case study showed there is value in live-case projects used in teaching marketing research. This study examined quantitative data to show the use of this approach increased student experience in the subject. This study also suggested that live-case projects can help students by providing relevant, real-life, job-ready skills that promote active student participation and engagement, both of which are laudable educational goals. The live-case project offers a platform by which students can gain conceptual and analytical skills that are valued by potential employers.

The researchers therefore support the use of live-case projects. They also agree with others that a live-case project needs to be workable and needs to fit specific course constraints (Lopez & Lee, 2005). In the

case described, the students' base-level knowledge of marketing management and strategy influenced the instructor's experience in teaching this subject. Another influence that contributed to the success of live-case projects is the client's cooperation and support; this client commitment is essential. Therefore, some external and internal constraints need to be satisfied if live-case projects in subjects such as marketing research are to be as fulfilling for the lecturer as they are for students and other stakeholders (i.e., the client and the marketing research industry).

Client based projects provide sound educational reasons as discussed above. These projects can also be used across disciplines. Cameron, Trudel, Titah, Léger (2012) used live-case studies in three different IS courses: IS project management course, a systems analysis and design course, and a capstone course on enterprise system implementation. In a study published by the American Association of Community Colleges (2002), service learning projects are important in increasing student learning and are used across disciplines and academic levels. Finally, Abes, Jackson, and Jones's (2002) study gave the faculty perceptions of the use of live-case projects or otherwise.

In conclusion, while there are sound educational reasons for providing a live-case project to students in marketing, there is a need for care and extensive planning in its implementation.

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