RECREATING THE PRINCIPLES OF MARKETING GROUP PROJECT: A CASE STUDY IN SERVICE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Assurance of learning initiatives are increasing demanded by accrediting agencies and university stakeholder groups. Among these is an expectation that students can bridge classroom theories with real world experiences. Many professors feel that group projects give students the closest thing to a real world experience that they can get in the classroom. This article details a practical example that builds on the service learning literature. The project stressed the principles of the course and benefitted a local charity simultaneously. Students encountered challenges similar to problems typical of a true business environment while learning the benefits of civic engagement.

Key words: AACSB, assurance of learning, client-based projects, experiential learning, principles of marketing, service learning.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the group project to modern business schools has become increasingly significant as more and more professors recognize the relevance and benefit of bringing real-world environments into the classroom (Goodnight 2005; Barr, Dixon, and Gassenheimer 2005). Marketing is particularly fertile ground for group projects because so many of the concepts discussed in marketing classes are the same issues that are tackled using a team approach in the business world. In addition to the capstone experience the Introduction to Marketing, or Principles, classes are an ideal opportunity for Marketing group projects because the range of concepts that can be applied in the project can cover so many of the fundamental areas of the course. Since the class is often required for non-marketing majors it is also a chance to show students from other areas of business the tangible results of a real marketing effort and demonstrate the benefits of marketing as a vital area of business, as well as an interesting area of study. Further, a project that covers many areas of marketing is ideal for an introductory course because it instills not only the importance of all the various concepts covered throughout the term, but also shows their practical importance.

Service learning seems particularly suited to the discipline and has been successfully integrated into a wide variety of marketing courses "including Marketing Principles, Consumer Behavior, Retailing, Marketing Research, and Services Marketing" (Easterling and Rudell 1997). The purpose of this article is to take these principles and further the literature in discussion of their practical implementation (see Haley 2004).

Marketing professors have embraced group projects (Barr, Dixon, and Gassenheimer 2005) in part because they tend to find these projects meaningful and enriching to student performance and the overall learning experience (see Pfaff and Huddleston 2003). AACSB (2007) states among the assurance of learning standards, in the guidelines for accreditation eligibility, that undergraduate and graduate programs should include learning experiences that include group dynamics in organizations. Team projects provide a hands-on learning experience opportunity for students to learn these dynamics.

In addition to the guidance by AACSB, increasingly the mission statements of business schools reflect a need for client-based community projects or involvement. Due to the dependent nature of Universities on the support from the communities in which they are located, engagement between the University and the community is often a part of the University's mission statement. Business schools, as subunits of universities, need to have mission statements that are consistent with the overall mission of the University (AACSB 2007). Thus there is a strategic impetus for business schools to adopt practices that help enhance the learning opportunities for students and to engage the community.

To make an impression on a student who has participated in a sea of group papers and presentations has become increasingly difficult, so one of the ways to get through is to fundamentally change the group project by not making it about the class at all, but about using what

is taught in the class in a way that brings the concepts to life in the real world. Further, with a service foundation these projects go on to provide benefits beyond the classroom by creating community goodwill, providing publicity for local charities, and give students a broader understanding of the community around them (Haley 2004; Kenworthy-U'ren 2003). This is clearly a trend that is being embraced by marketing faculty. McIntyre, Webb, and Hite (2005) found that more than 80 percent of the marketing faculty respondents were engaged in at least one activity that fit their classifications for service learning.

SERVICE LEARNING

The concept of learning through experience is certainly not new. It dates back to educational theorist John Dewey (1938) who wrote that experience was both "the means and the goal of education." On a broader scale Dewey viewed education as being derived from "participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race" (Dworkin 1959, original work published Dewey 1897). This elevation of the social consciousness of the race as a necessary element of the educational process sets the stage for all of the learning through experience and social consciousness issues that have become so prevalent in today's business schools. But the best way to accomplish that task is open to interpretation.

Using activities to broaden the scope of a course and to provide a learning experience that extends to co-curricular activities helps students: to be part of something bigger, to develop intellectual curiosity, to improve academically, and to develop social and cultural awareness that benefit their career development (Wilhite and Banset 1998). These attributes are meaningful to future employers and thus should be important to faculty concerned with preparing students beyond theoretical teachings.

Many researchers have their own guidelines for what a service-learning project must contain (see Root and Thorme 2001). Even the definition of what constitutes service learning is something that has been a matter of debate for decades (Kenworthy-U'ren 1999). But the necessity of a strong ethical foundation and the incorporation of service learning has become even more relevant given the recent ethical scandals in the business world (McAlister 2004), which in turn have created a challenge for business schools (Holstein 2005) that has made it much more important to stress the positive aspects of a business education. To that purpose service learning is a powerful tool because it can show how the principles that are being taught in the classroom can not only invigorate learning, but also engage students in social concerns that can begin a lifelong interest in those areas (Clarke 2005; Easterling and Rudell 1997). Students who come into a classroom with the impression that Marketing is "evil" or that it's a discipline concerned with making consumers

want things that they do not need can see it in a new light when those very principles are being used to improve their community. Service learning not only provides a vehicle for conveying information, it also by its nature provides benefits to students, faculty, the institution, and the community (Easterling and Rudell 1997).

Past researchers have found that service learning projects help teach students the importance of problem-solving, decision-making, and time management skills (Schmidt and Richter 2006). Forcing students to adhere to timelines encourages them to improvise and quickly assess their decisions. Working with real clients keeps students excited about the learning experience and helps build self-confidence.

SPECIAL CASES OF LARGE CLASS SIZES AND CLIENT-BASED PROJECTS

While a large majority of the marketing faculty engage in service learning experiences (McIntyre, Webb, and Hite 2005), often these experiences are limited to capstone or graduate level classes due to the large number of students in lower level classes. There are four key players in students consulting projects: the client, the university/school, the students, and the faculty (Wakefield, Rockmore, and Womer 2006). Successful projects will balance the needs of the clients and the students against the resources and objectives of the instructor and the institution.

Schools and universities have resources and objectives that must be balanced against student community based projects. At some institutions, the volume of students requires that introduction classes have a hundred to as many as several hundred students. Though this does not necessarily mean that projects are not possible, projects are often limited due to the resources and time of the professor. Professors who do integrate experiential learning projects into large class sections have found that students develop the skills needed in business that help them in their job search and experience enhanced learning from the course (Smith 2004).

The number of students in a class is often a criteria used in evaluating universities, both *BusinessWeek* and *U.S. News & World Report,* report class size in their annual survey and rankings of universities. *U.S. News & World Report* reports three measures related to class size as it relates to faculty resources: percent of classes with fewer than 20 students; percent of classes with 50 or more students; and student faculty ratio (*U.S. News & World Report* 2007). These rankings suggest that smaller class sizes are desired. What is desired and what is practiced are, of course, different. A single class group project will be proposed that would be manageable, in the authors' opinion, for up to 60 to 70 students. For class sizes beyond that the actual project administration would need to be coordinated by teaching assistants. Since many large

courses have breakouts with graduate assistants, these assistants could meet with their students each week to review project details. Rather than having all of the students work on one project, each section of students could have its own project with the project presented here as one possible model. This way the groups would essentially compete to produce the best project to benefit the organization chosen. The teaching assistants would act as liaisons to the professor to make sure that the projects are going as planned. While large classes do present problems in actualizing the project as presented here there are certainly ways to turn those problems into opportunities. Having a number of large teams working on wholly separate projects would create a competitive dynamic that could be beneficial.

SCHOOL OF BUSINESS MISSION AND SERVICE TO COMMUNITY

"The best interests of business and business schools are served when they communicate and collaborate on their shared, fundamental goals" (AACSB 2006). As the leading accreditation agency of business schools worldwide, the AACSB has clearly indicated that business schools must work in collaboration with businesses. The way in which that collaboration occurs varies in the same way that every school varies from another.

A fundamental principle of the University mission in the case presented is community service. To encourage and reward community service, students receive two transcripts upon graduation, an academic transcript and an experiential transcript. The experiential transcript provides students with a credible documentation of their achievements that demonstrate service learning experiences. "Service learning opportunities are defined as service experiences linked to a specific class and designed to reinforce classroom knowledge" (*Source omitted to preserve anonymity of authors during review*).

Service learning in business, and specifically marketing, classes can take many forms. It is easy to make the connections between textbook theories and real-world examples from businesses within any school's own community. However, creating a genuine link between the classroom and the real world is a challenge that many schools and faculty members struggle to make (AACSB 2006). The reasons can be many, but many can be attributed to the lack of a reward system to encourage and foster faculty to engage in service learning activities in the classroom.

For faculty at many institutions, there are few or no rewards or mechanisms in place to encourage or assist in building relationships with business professionals or community organizations. Often the primary focus is on teaching and research, though service completes the trinity of academic evaluation at most schools, service is generally considered a deterrent from the two more critical areas. This seems contradictive to the directive of the AACSB and to the mission statements of many of its member schools. Even a cursory examination of AACSB school missions found that 15 out of 20 randomly selected schools had references to outreach into the communities around them. While not the focus of this study it does seem fair to say that business schools of today are involved with the world around them and projects of this nature are a way to bridge that gap and help accomplish that mission.

PROJECT DETAILS AND TIMELINE

Some professors align their courses with local businesses, and while that is perhaps a more realistic example of the business world the inherent downside is in creating potential profit for a single firm using what can essentially be unpaid student labor. Beyond the ethical question this raises it also increases the potential for student dissatisfaction with the project (Razzouk, Seitz, and Rizkallah 2003). To avoid some of the potential pitfalls discussed in the literature students in the project presented were compensated for any expenses and a key aspect of the project was to find a non-profit organization that was perceived by the students as an important local charity. The University in question gives students "experiential" credit for hours worked above basic course work that contribute to their learning experience. By University policy, these hours cannot include time spent in the regular class lessons or time spent for regular studies related to the class. Service learning hours may include meeting with the client, doing primary or secondary research necessary for the client/service project, activities directly related to the client/service experience, and final presentations to the client, and other tasks and activities that are above the expected basic course work load. Thus, reading the text, preparing for exams, attending class, and completing other assignments not related to the project, or other graded elements of the course do not count for experiential/service learning credit hours.

To avoid double credit for the same effort, students may complete diaries of their activities, logs, journals, or other similar tools that are used to document the time spent on activities above the expected hours expected in a course. This accounting methodology is encouraged by the school's Service Learning department. Classes are not the only source of service learning hours that students may earn while at the University; volunteering and participating in a variety of activities that benefit the community individually or as members of school clubs or groups also can be included. The Experiential Transcripts give students an opportunity to document their efforts. Students are not required to put in Service Learning hours for graduation requirements. It is a faculty choice to include service learning in courses where they see the fit.

The grade in the course was not dependent on the specific number of hours worked, but on the quality of the

students' solutions to the business problems presented to them during that time. The result is a project that becomes important to the student in a way that "academic exercises cannot equal" (Root and Thorme 2001). This is not to be confused with volunteering. The purpose of the project is not to get the student to donate time to charity, but to teach the student the principles involved in the course in a way that resonates with them (Kenworthy-U'ren 1999).

The group project used as an illustration of this concept was for a Principles of Marketing course with 41 students. In the semester before the class, the professor initiated the project by identifying a suitable client organization with which to work. Meeting with the executive director, the project was outlined and the expectations for the class and of the client were set.

The class was introduced to the project on the first day of class with the discussion of the expectations and outline of the course. The project was detailed and the necessary outcomes that would be expected throughout the semester by the students were presented. Rather than have each group presented with a similar task, the class as a whole was charged with creating a fundraiser for the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity. The professor proposed a Silent Auction as the method for the fundraiser, although students were given the option of choosing by majority vote either a different charity or a different method of fundraising.

In the second week of classes, applications for team assignments were collected. The challenges that were faced in the project required that rather than all doing the same thing students could work in groups that most closely matched their interests. The class voted for a President who was the liaison to the charity, who directed all of the management meetings, who ultimately had the senior decision-making authority for the project, and who managed conflict and cooperation between groups.

By the fifth class meeting, teams were formed based upon skills and abilities and preferences listed in students' team applications. The class was broken into groups based on anticipated needs for the project. Each group had a leader who represented the group in management meetings. The groups included: Accounting, Advertising, Media Relations/PR, National Sponsorships, Local Sponsorships, Travel/Sports Sponsorships, Venue and Attendance, Logistics, Invitations, and a final group known as Firepeople who served as overload capacity for groups that had a need for more help at various times throughout the project.

The sponsorship groups obtained auction items and were charged with local business contacts. The Logistics team created project timelines so all relevant deadlines would be met. The Invitations team was in charge of building demand for the event by creating invitations, obtaining and creating mailing lists, and targeting desired attendees. The Venue and Attendance team set up and staffed the event as well as handling all of the details in securing the facility and making all of the arrangements for elements such as what would be served and how it would be designed. The advertising and Media/PR groups created ads and got articles published and PSA airtime for the spots they created.

While some groups such as Accounting were outside the discipline, but still necessary for the project, all groups had tasks that required the application of their marketing knowledge. The accounting group was responsible for budgeting expenses, tracking donations, tallying the final auction sales, and keeping other groups within the constraints necessary to reach the objective. This function was necessary for keeping focused on the outcome and measurability of the success of the overall marketing project. Further, because many accounting majors take the course as a business core requirement doing this project taught them not only the importance of working in concert with the marketing groups, but also the importance of understanding the marketing aspect of their own jobs. It became more than just adding numbers, it became about presenting them effectively. Students applied for the groups of the greatest interest and were also asked if they would be willing to head each group for which they applied.

Demand for the different groups was uneven, but with the help of the class President all the groups were filled in relative proportion to the anticipated workload for each group. Everyone got in a group that was among their top three choices. There were some basic guidelines given to each group, but it was also up to each group to determine how it could best contribute to the project. Some students found the ambiguity of not being told specifically what to do to be irritating, but many took it as an opportunity to come up with inventive solutions to the problems that they faced. That was, by design, part of the challenge.

Throughout the semester as chapter material related to important facets of the project, the project was used as the focal example in class. This helped to keep students moving forward with the project in addition to enhancing the depth of their learning through doing simultaneously tasks related to the theories discussed in class. This integration throughout the semester made the class fun and exciting for the students. Limitedly, but consistently, a portion of class time was devoted to discussion of the project specifically. This time was also used for interaction between groups to facilitate and manage the different functions across the class teams.

The local Habitat for Humanity was extremely supportive and worked with the President and accounting team to provide guidance in terms of what they hoped would be accomplished and through technical assistance such as the creation of tax deduction letters for donors. The Venue group scouted facilities and then ran into the

very real-world problem of not being able to get the date they had planned for, which sent the entire class into a crisis of having to rearrange everything to happen several weeks earlier than had been originally planned.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

The results were exceptionally positive on a number of different levels. The most direct measure of the success of the project was in terms of the result for the charity. Most items were donated, but the project did incur some nominal expenses. After expenses the students were able to give the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity more than $3,700. The quality of the event and the infusion of funds to Habitat elicited universal praise from the organization (a comment we received from a member of the board, which was typical of their responses, was "Congratulations to you and your class for the excellent job done with the auction. Everything was great! Please convey to your class our appreciation for an outstanding project."), from the Dean ("Well done!! Thank you for giving our students that experience and you all were front page news today, so thanks for that as well."), and from the students involved (several comments that were typical of the responses received included "this has been the most educational, fun, interesting group project I have ever participated in . . . I was excited about this project from day one. That doesn't happen very often," and "I benefitted from this project more than any other project I have had in the Business School. Most classes require you to write a lengthy paper, while this gave me hands on experience . . .").

The students obtained more than seventy different items to auction. The items donated were wide ranging and included: gift baskets from local merchants, Major League dugout level baseball tickets, a round of golf for four at a prestigious private course, autographed sports items, hotel stays, a gas grill, original artwork, restaurant gift certificates, and a home security system.

The National Sponsorship group found that once the event date was set that there was not time to line up major sponsors because all of their contacts indicated that the lead time was not sufficient. They proposed changing their group to Campus Sponsorships and they worked to arrange sponsors within the campus community. This is a great example of how the project worked because situations arose that did not fit the formula and students wrote a new formula. It taught students not only the importance of contingency planning, but also how to overcome unexpected obstacles. Two days before the event the class found that despite having a pre-arranged policy and Public Safety approval for serving wine, the University had added an additional layer of approvals that they did not know about because of the increased sensitivity to serving alcohol on campus. It required a mobilization of efforts from several groups working together that gave students a better understanding of deadline pressure and of the challenges of event management than even might be accomplished through a marketing simulation designed to throw them some curves.

One could argue that one of the downsides of a project like this is that the crises are real and they may be unsolvable, or that if crises do not arise then the students will not learn from them. But real-world problems are an inevitable outcome in service learning (Duke 1999) because crises always have a way of arising. At one point the inability to lock down a venue almost caused the class to scuttle the project and find another method of fundraising, but when they decided to continue it was with a renewed dedication to the project that spoke very well of their determination to succeed.

The event staff obtained donations of soft drinks, wine, and a wide variety of foods. They also secured the on-campus ballroom that provided numerous challenges in terms of scheduling, extensive paperwork, and arranging security for the event (since wine was being served).

Donations came in until the last minute. The advertising group created and updated a presentation that was displayed on a large screen at the event showing things such as details about the charity and the items up for bid as well as thanks to the sponsors. The accounting group, in a display of pure marketing, created a spreadsheet showing top bids for auction items that was projected to the crowd throughout the night. Whenever it came up and people saw they had been outbid there was a dash to the tables as people bid higher for their items of interest. A Mass Communications student who worked at a local radio station was the Master of Ceremonies and held live auctions for some items to generate bids and keep the evening interesting. One large donor attended anonymously and reported later being very pleased that despite having donated only the day before that his firm was in the presentation as a featured sponsor.

The media relations group secured PSA time on local radio stations and informed local media via personal contacts and press releases before the event. Those contacts resulted in a front page article in the local newspaper that cast the event, the school, and the charity in a very favorable light.

The event was a very high-profile one and had things gone terribly wrong it could have reflected poorly on the charity, the school, the students, and the professor, but when given the opportunity to excel and a little guidance most students took great pride in meeting the challenge. As the class President said in her evaluation, "[thanks for] giving us freedom to create the event, sometimes mess up, and ultimately succeed. We were not only able to learn about marketing, but also how to positively affect our community."

For the experiential transcript that the university uses to document service learning the 41 students combined earned more than 600 hours of service learning. These

service learning hours are for time spent above and beyond the normal expectations of a class without the service learning component. Not all students earned the same number of hours, as with any student activity, not all participate equally. Thus for this project, the service learning hours were based upon the journal entries kept that recorded activities that extended beyond the typical Principles of Marketing course.

LIMITATIONS

Principles classes vary in student number size by institutions. In classes larger than 60 or 70 students it becomes difficult for faculty to manage projects without additional resources. A faculty member has limited time in which to recruit client organizations, keep administration informed of their outside involvements, manage teams, oversee the project, and grade the final reports. As others have found even in large class sections (Smith 2004), projects provide learning opportunities that a traditional classroom cannot.

An option for faculty who desire to implement projects in larger sections may be the use of proctors and/or graduate assistants. Large sections can be divided into smaller, more manageable groups and led by proctors or graduate students with a small portion of class time on a regular basis perhaps used to coordinate these smaller group meetings. This is a resource that must be attainable within a school and can sometimes be limited by funding or other constraints. However, as the sample of missions statements from AACSB schools shows, if the school of business has stated community involvement as part of their mission, the faculty member should have some leverage in requesting the additional support.

Another limiting factor for some faculty adoption of projects in principles classes may be on-line class delivery. As with large class sizes, some adaption would be necessary but in itself is not a cause for not trying to adopt group projects, although it does appear to present some unique obstacles that might be difficult to overcome. The group meetings necessary outside of class time could be facilitated through chat rooms, online meetings, and message boards. Exchange of electronic files and the use of reviewing and tracking of edits to documents would allow team members to participate and contribute to a group effort. These are not uncommon skills necessary to the business environment that students will face upon graduation. Even final presentations could be done via video conferencing and/or video podcasting. These too are increasingly common business activities and therefore valuable skills for students to become acquainted with while in school.

Other limitations of group projects are manifested through student behaviors. Students find it easier to "hide" in large numbers and thus less involved or poorer performing students may not gain as much from the experience. To limit this behavior, students were required to submit peer evaluations of the perceived efforts that they and their teammates contributed throughout the semester. These were matched against the logs of the team captains' who were required to do a more formal evaluation of each team member. So, though the team grade was shared across all team members, there was a mechanism to weight individual team members efforts against the overall group effort.

A final limitation that adds effort to the faculty member is that clients need to be recruited and nurtured. Universities often have relations with key businesses that provide support for foundations and/or through membership as board members to executive councils serving deans, presidents, and other administrators. These relationships are often political in nature and it is possible to alienate some of these individuals if the students' projects are not well managed.

CASE DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

The project was a success on many levels. The students raised a considerable amount of money for the charity. The charity got increased awareness within the University and the community. The students became more involved in the community around them. The School of Business was cast in a favorable light by helping a local charity and by the publicity that surrounded the event. It should be noted that one of the less tangible of the results was the lack of quantifiable measures of student learning in this project versus more traditional group projects. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the students believe they gained greater insight into the subject, but since learning the material is ultimately the purpose of course there should be a quantifiable way to compare the student course outcomes to outcomes of students doing more traditional projects. This is an area that is ideal for further examination. The students reported that the experience was educational and enlightening, but educators need ways to assess that to be sure it is an improvement over more traditional methods.

Evaluation of the students efforts were based upon a variety of inputs. Like in a work environment, group efforts are hard to parse out responsibility. The teams shared grades but individual peer evaluations were used to collect information about individual perceived and actual contributions to the group effort. A limitation of group projects is the ability for poor students to ride on better students' performance (Martell 2007). However, pairing of students does encourage peer learning opportunities that are still valid learning experiences.

The concept of applying service-learning to marketing is certainly not a new one, and the format for this project is an example to demonstrate the potential benefits for re-engineering the Principles of Marketing group

project. The important factors in the success of the project were that the students worked to benefit a local non-profit, that they learned by doing something real and unscripted, that they had the opportunity to fail or succeed, and that the key principles of the course were interjected throughout the project. A number of lessons were learned in the execution of this project that might benefit future classes. For example, there was so much time spent securing a campus ballroom that the project almost fell apart. In future terms it would be better to go in with a location secured for the class in advance. Students also filled out project evaluation forms that gave specific suggestions to their counterparts in future groups that contain a number of useful comments. Among the ways to refine the project were specific deadlines for securing items for donation (so they can be properly promoted), suggestions for dealing with closing out item bids and dealing with bidders who have won multiple items, as well as recommendations for facility layout and event timing. While it's always good for students to learn from their own experience it seems practical to also have them learn from the experience of past groups as well.

There are obviously many projects that could be undertaken that would produce a similar educational and service-learning benefit. Other successful Marketing service learning projects at this University have been anything from revising publicity materials for a local Chamber of Commerce to undertaking food and clothing drives for homeless shelters. The only thing that limits the scope of the project is the imagination of the professor and the students. Since Marketing professors and students are a very imaginative bunch there are endless ways to incorporate these principles into Principles classes.

CONCLUSIONS

While not every project will go this smoothly, the most important thing that was gained, beyond the money for the charity, beyond the positive publicity, and beyond the satisfaction of the students with the project, was the fact that a group of students functioned like members of a real organization and created and executed a project that required not only learning about the concepts in a Marketing course, but applying them. The project was a success because it taught them about Marketing and about how all of the different aspects of it have to work together to be successful. It also was a departure because rather than having a number of groups working either independently or against each other they were all working together for a common goal, which is another real-world theme because within a firm ultimately the important issue is organizational success.

A project of this type does require more work from the professor, because while he or she wants the students to learn by doing it's also important to step in when a situation might seriously endanger the success of the project. But when students work together and learn while making a significant difference in the community it can be rewarding to the professor in ways that rarely come from reading a fifty-page paper.

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