

USING COMMUNITY PARTNERS TO FACILITATE LEARNING

Denise Ogden, Penn State University - Lehigh Valley
James R. "Doc" Ogden – Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

The utilization of community partners to facilitate learning is beneficial for the institution as well as students. Advantages include making connections with industry, providing real-world experiences for students, allowing students to apply lessons from class to a real business problem, the development of written and oral communication skills and providing a venue for students to network with industry executives. This paper describes a recent experience of partnering with a corporation for a regional student retailing competition. Advantages of the program as well as lessons learned are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in the education and business environment have prompted a demand for student-centered approaches to teaching (Lamont and Friedman, 1997). Business managers seek students with skills which apply concepts learned in college. Today's business managers seek employees with strong communication skills who are able and ready to apply knowledge in a business setting.

This article describes methods to increase experiential learning by engaging students in projects sponsored by community businesses and organizations. In essence these projects are live case studies. A live case study is differentiated from written cases in that the live case study involves student teams working with an outside organization to solve a real business problem(s) (Burns 1990). Live cases contain a majority of the critical components required for experiential learning (Gentry 1990). First a review of relevant literature is discussed then the suggested steps involved in coordinating community partner involved are presented.

Experiential Learning

In recent years marketing education has evolved into a student-centered approach. This approach represents a shift from an instruction paradigm to a learning paradigm (Saunders, 1997). In a learning paradigm, students are more engaged because they are active participants in the process as opposed to passive learners (Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, and Mayo2000). Other terms for this shift include

collaborative learning, experiential learning (Kolb, 1981) and service learning (Brown, 2000).

There are many activities and techniques that fall under the realm of experiential learning including but not limited to simulation games, internships, live cases, field projects (Gentry 1990), live cases studies (Cheney 2001) and working with organizations outside the university to solve real problems (Kennedy, Lawton, and Walker, 2001). Service learning fits under the umbrella of experiential learning. According to Furco (1996), service learning is different from other types of experiential learning in that service learning projects "equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service" and ensures "equal focus on the service provided and the learning that is occurring" (p. 6).

Value and Challenges

Experiential approaches benefit students, faculty members, the academic institution and the company involved. For example, Benigni, Heng and Cameron (2004) found that clients involved in experiential student exercises are very satisfied with the experience and often this satisfaction translates into offering students internships or jobs based on the performance in the projects. In addition, local media coverage often followed such projects. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International requires active student involvement in the learning process as a part of their accreditation criteria (AACSB, 2003). Many times experiential projects demand additional time and approaches than traditional lecture-style courses. Demands can include obtaining institutional permission, finding an industry sponsor, organizing

transportation, organizing student and sponsor interactions, dealing with logistical problems (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2003), students dealing with variable situations, uncertainty and incomplete information (Elam and Spotts, 2004).

Each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) surveys its employer members about their hiring plans for the upcoming class of new college graduates and other employment-related issues. According to the NACE *Job Outlook 2006* report, employers say they consider communication skills to be important in job candidates, but find that many potential employees lack strong communication skills. Other skills deemed important include, honesty/integrity, teamwork skills, strong work ethic, analytical skills, flexibility/adaptability, interpersonal skills and motivation/initiative. In order to provide students the opportunity to experience real-world issues, two professors from different colleges sought out an opportunity for a competition among regional colleges/universities.

Steps

There are a number of suggested steps that should be taken to increase the chances of success when incorporating a community partner into a class or club activity. The following steps are based on the authors' experiences and are presented with the hopes that instructors will sidestep any problems.

Step 1 – Finding a Fit

Step 1 involves finding a suitable community partner which fits the design of the class. While seemingly a simple endeavor, care should be taken to choose a partner that will be involved in all phases of the project. These phases include design, participation during the project, final student evaluation in written and oral project and follow-up. It is important at this step to create realistic expectations concerning time involvement on the part of the community sponsor.

Step 2 – Determine the Project

Step 2 involves discussion with the potential community partner on a suitable project for students. The professor may already have an idea in mind but it is important to be receptive to ideas offered by the sponsor. To be successful, this must be a collaborative effort. Once a project is chosen, the professor should write up a brief and send it to the

community partner for review. This way, the partner can make any adjustment prior to launch. It is during this stage the logistics of the project are worked out. A project plan with dates and duties should be completed. Also any budgetary matters should be ironed during this step. Keep in mind that many times more than one school may be involved in the competition. As such each college (or university) should be provided case information in advance to allow ample time to work the competition into their semester learning plan, syllabus or club activity.

It is important that steps 1 and 2 be completed with enough lead time to make adjustments to the class design. Depending on the project it may take months or even a year of lead time to increase the chances of success. Many sponsors ask that students, or their faculty advisor, sign non-disclosure agreements for information that is provided which is of a sensitive nature.

Step 3 – Present Project to Class

In step three, the project is presented to the students in the class (club). At this stage it is important to provide a written document so that student can refer to it once they begin the project. This document should describe the project, provide deadlines and expectations, provide rules and present criteria on which the grade will be based. Additionally if there are monetary or trophy-based competitive elements to the project, the prizes should be described.

Step 4 – Communication During the Project

Whether or not the professor made a strong choice for a partner will become apparent in this stage. During the project, students or the professor may need questions answered from the sponsor. The most desired partners are those that promptly answer questions. It is suggested that any communication to the partner be done by the professor only. The last thing a sponsor wants is to be contacted individually by all students in the class. The professor can eliminate duplicate questions and screen the questions so that the university is seen in the best possible light (i.e. omit misspellings, inappropriate questions). This also allows the professor to gain insight into the types of issues that students or teams may be having.

Step 5 – The Final Written and Oral Presentations

A strong project will have both written and oral components to them. The written project can be given to the sponsor for their use. The oral presentations provide students the opportunity to display their work and enthusiasm for the project. This also provides students the experience of writing a “professional” business document and presented to “real” business people. It is important to review any written material before it goes to the sponsor. This prevents embarrassing situations where there may be a page missing, improper grammar/spelling or writing that makes no sense. If time permits, the students should deliver their presentation to the class before going live. Peer feedback can be used to strengthen speeches.

Step 6 – Follow-up

Once the project is completed, it is important to follow-up with the sponsor. A post-mortem is in order to determine what went well and what areas could be improved. It is also important to thank the sponsor. One idea is to have students write the sponsor a thank you letter describing how the project benefited them. Another idea is to present the sponsor with an appreciation award.

Outcomes

The outcomes of a live case study are numerous. First and foremost the experience provides students with experience in solving real business problems. The networking gained from the experience is also valuable. In many instances, these types of projects have resulted in an internship or permanent employment. Additionally, positive media coverage is often generated. The connection between the university and the community is strengthened when an event is well run. This leads to confidence from the community that the university is doing well in educating students.

REFERENCES

- Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International (2003). Eligibility Procedures and Standards for Business Accreditation. Adopted April, 2003, Revised January, 2006. Retrieved Aug. 25, 2006 from <http://www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/standards.asp>
- Benigni, V. Cheng, I., Cameron, G.T. (2004). The Role of Clients in the Public Relations Campaigns Course. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*. 2004; 59(3), Education Module, 259-277.
- Bobbitt, L.M., Inks, S.A., Kemp, K.J., & Mayo, D.T. (2000). Integrating marketing courses to enhance team-based experiential learning. *Journal of Marketing Education*. 22(1), 15-24.
- Brown, K.A. (2000). Developing project management skills: A service learning approach. *Project Management Journal*. 31(4), 53-58.
- Burns, A. C. (1990). The use of live case studies in business education: Pros, cons and guidelines. In *Guide to business gaming and experiential learning*, edited by James Gentry, (pp. 201-215). London: Nichols/GP Publishing.
- Cheney, Rebecca, S. (2001). Intercultural business communication, international students, and experiential learning. *Business Communication Quarterly*. 64, 90-104.
- Elam, E. L. and Spotts, Harlam, E. (2004). Achieving Marketing Curriculum Integration: A Live Case Study Approach. *Journal of Marketing Education*. Vol. 26. No. 1, 50-65.
- Furco, A. (1996). Service-learning: A balanced approach to experiential education. *Expanding Boundaries: Serving and Learning*. Washington: Corporation for National Service.
- Gentry, James W. (1990). What is experiential learning? In *Guide to business gaming and experiential learning*, edited by James Gentry, 9-20. London: Nichols/GP Publishing.
- Kennedy, E.J., Lawton, L. & Walker, E. (2001). The case for using live cases: Shifting the paradigm in marketing education. *Journal of Marketing Education*. 23, 145-151.

Kenworthy-U'Ren A. (2003). Service-learning and negotiation: Engaging students in real-world projects that make a difference. *Negotiation Journal*. Jan., 51-63.

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lamont, L.M. & Friedman, K. (1997). Meeting the challenges to undergraduate marketing education. *Journal of Marketing Education*. 19, 17-30.

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (2006). Press Release dated April 26, 2006:

“Employers cite communication skills as key, but say many job seekers lack them” Retrieved Aug. 2006 from <http://www.naceweb.org/press/display.asp?year=2006&prid=235>

Saunders, P.M. (1997). Experiential learning, cases and simulation in business communications. *Business Communication Quarterly*. 60. 97.

Denise T. Ogden is an assistant professor of Marketing at the Lehigh Valley branch of Penn State University. She received her Ph.D. in Marketing from Temple University (Philadelphia). Her research interests include retailing, multi-cultural aspects of marketing and integrated marketing communication.

James R. Ogden is a professor of Marketing at The Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Northern Colorado. His research interests include retailing and integrated marketing communication