Outcomes of an Experiential Learning Project
in a Principles of Marketing Course

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Introduction

Experiential learning provides students with the opportunity to think critically about their own experiences and to test and develop innovative ideas and approaches to solve problems (Munoz & Huser 2008). Employers often express a preference for candidates that have had an internship experience. The thinking is that such experiences increase the employee's abilities to make contributions early and that these employees have obtained a higher level of business maturity (Drea, Singh & Engelland 1997). Experiential learning projects are often included at the conclusion of a student's plan of study. However, providing such opportunities as part of a student's initial exposure to the discipline of marketing may result in "a stronger foundation of basic marketing or business concepts through improved comprehension" (Munoz & Huser 2008, p. 215).

Challenges associated with implementing experiential learning projects within a Principles of Marketing course may include the realization that such a course may be the first exposure students have had to marketing concepts (Klink & Athaide 2004).

> "With respect to students enrolled in Principles of Marketing courses, however, it is difficult to place these students in "real-world" situations because the introductory course is often the first exposure to marketing skills and concepts" (Klink & Athaide 2004, p. 145).

While there may be challenges associated with implementing experiential learning projects within in Principle of Marketing courses and these challenges may be used to support the view that experiential learning is most appropriate for upper level marketing courses, there is value in incorporating such projects into introductory marketing courses (Klink & Athaide 2004). Despite the challenges, affording beginning marketing students the chance to participate in and to experience the real-world application of basic marketing concepts represents an educational opportunity (Petkus 2000). Additionally, many students who enroll in a Principles of Marketing course are not marketing majors, and may at times be uninterested in the course content (Wooldridge 2006). This supports a need for teaching techniques that stimulate activate student learning within Principles of Marketing courses (Munoz & Huser 2008). Experiential learning represents an example of such a teaching technique.

Research Question

Implementing an experiential learning project in a Principles of Marketing course may be challenging for faculty as students are learning and applying marketing concepts simultaneously. The first research question addressed by this study is as follows: is there a difference in student outcomes as measured by traditional assessments (such as exams) between a section of Principles of Marketing that implemented an experiential learning projects and a section that implemented a traditional assignments (i.e., the development of a marketing plan). Experiential learning projects may require additional support and coordination of the part of the faculty member. The second research question is: what type of support is required from faculty for the implementation of an experiential learning project within a Principles of Marketing course.

Methodology

A comparative analysis of mean exam scores was conducted between two sections of Principles of Marketing. Both sections of Principles of Marketing were offered during the same semester and taught by the same faculty member. Common lectures and exams were used in both sections of the course. The difference between the two sections was the assignment of a semester long experiential learning project in one section, and in the other section the assignment of a traditional marketing plan in which students select a product or service for their plan. Both projects were conducted as a group project.

To answer the second research question, a content analysis of announcements posted by the faculty member to

the learning management system was conducted. Additionally, emails exchanged between the faculty member and the participating organization were analyzed.

Project Description
This section provides a description of the experiential learning project as implemented. The objective of the project was to develop recommendations to assist the local police department in the recruitment of women and underrepresented minority officers. The students were responsible for providing two deliverables in the form of presentations. The first deliverable was a market analysis. The market analysis was comprised of a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, results from a community survey (developed and administered by students), a review of various police websites, and additional secondary data gathered by students as part of the project. The second deliverable included recommendations (based on the market analysis).

 Sixteen students were enrolled in this experiential learning section of Principles of Marketing. During the semester, with respect to the project, the class operated as one large group comprised of subgroups with approximately 4 students each. The subgroups were assigned to perform specific tasks and to contribute specific information (such as a summary of market demographics, an analysis of trends relative to minorities and women in policing, a community survey, a website analysis and a SWOT analysis). Subgroups periodically shared their findings with the entire class to ensure consistent learning and to reduce work redundancy across student subgroups. This was an important component of implementing the project.

There were 33 students enrolled in the comparator section of Principles of Marketing. The main project assignment for this section was the development of a marketing plan for a product or service selected by each student group. Students groups (comprised of approximately 5 students) submitted their marketing plan assignment in two parts and presented both parts (the entire plan) at the end of the semester. The first part of the plan included a market analysis, competitive analysis and a SWOT analysis). The second part of the plan included the marketing mix.

A comparison of key course components and their timing for both Principles of Marketing sections is provided in table 1.

Table 1: Key Course Components by Principles of Marketing Section and by Week

Course component	Experiential learning project (week #)	Traditional marketing plan (week #)
Student prepare for experiential learning project kick off meeting		3-4
Test 1	4	4
Kick off meeting and presentation (participating organization presents to students followed by questions and answers)	5	-
First portion of marketing plan due	-	7
Test 2	8	8
Update meeting and presentation (students presents to participating organization followed by questions and answers) – Deliverable #1	9	-

Second and final portion of the marketing plan due	-	10
Test 3	12	12
Final presentation (students present to the participating organization and others in attendance followed by questions and answers) – Deliverable #2	14	-
Final presentation of marketing plans		14-15
Student reflection paper (students write a 1 – 2 page regarding their experiential project experience)	15	-
Final Exam	17	17

Results

Study results are presented in the following section. Student performance on exams, along with an analysis of faculty and student effort are provided.

Student performance on exams

Average test scores were computed for each of 3 tests and the final exam administered during the semester in each of the two sections. A two sample T-test assuming unequal variances was performed to determine statistically significant differences in mean test scores achieved between the two sections. Table 2 summarized these results.

Table 2: Comparison of Means Scores by Section

Test/Exam	Experiential learning project	Traditional marketing plan
Test 1 (100 points)		
Mean	80.38	81.68
Variance	63.58	83.49
Observations	16	31
p(T<=t) two-tail		0.617
Test 2 (100 points)		
Mean	76.27	82.61
Variance	45.92	75.98
Observations	15	31
p(T<=t) two-tail		0.011
Test 3 (100 points)		
Mean	86.43	88.03
Variance	76.26	52.84
Observations	14	33
p(T<=t) two-tail		0.553
Final Exam (150 points)		
Mean	141.19	143.91
Variance	193.90	95.09
Observations	16	33
p(T<=t) two-tail		0.490

For the experiential learning project section of Principles of Marketing mean test scores ranged from 76.27 to 86.43 out of 100 points. The range for mean test scores for the traditional marketing plan section ranged from 88.03 to 81.68 out of 100 points. As illustrated in Table 2, test 2 was the only test for which there is a statistically significant difference in mean test scores between the two sections ($p = 0.011$). It is worth noting that this test was scheduled during week 8, one week before the second face to face meeting/first student presentation to the local police department. It is possible that the time required for students to prepare for the meeting and presentation contributed to the lower test score on test 2 in the experiential learning section.

Faculty effort
In addition to defining the scope of the experiential learning project and the project deliverables with the participating organization, the faculty member was responsible for ensuring that students completed the project in a timely and accurate manner. Communication with both students and the participating organization was critical to the success of this project. Specifically for students, managing timelines and due dates in order to ensure the development of content (for PowerPoint slides), sharing of content with other students (those in their work groups and the class as whole) and incorporating feedback (in preparation for presentations) was important. Over the course of the semester in which the experiential learning project took place, faculty posted 46% more announcements to the learning management system for the experiential learning section of Principles of Marketing than for other section (54 versus 37). Additionally, it was noted that for the section experiential learning section 21 (39%) of the 54 announcements posted were specifically related to the experiential learning project.

A content analysis of the 21 announcements related to the experiential learning project revealed that 17 of the announcement reflected content specifically focused on the development and sharing of data for the client deliverables/presentations. This included background information provided by the participating organization and the faculty member, student work (e.g., data analysis, findings and student summaries), meeting agendas and logistics, presentation expectations/assignments and other project related details. These 17 announcements fell into one of the following two categories: "project activities/decisions" or "feedback to students". The remaining 4 announcements were general reminders containing instructions and due dates specifically related to the project reflection paper and the peer evaluation components of the project. These findings are summarized below.

Table 3: Breakdown of 21 Learning Management System Announcements

Announcement Category	Project Activities/ Decisions	Feedback to Students	General Reminders
Number of Announcements	13*	7*	4
Description	Summary emails regarding class activities, agreements and assigned tasks related to the project	Congratulatory emails for a job well done or emails expressing confidence in the students' ability to perform	Emails containing instructions and due dates specifically related to the reflection paper or peer review assignment

*Three announcements appeared in both the project activities/decisions and feedback to students category

In addition to the learning management system announcements posted, there were 15 email exchanges during the course of the semester between the faculty member and the participating organization. The content of these emails included background documents for the project, meeting agendas, logistical information for campus visits and presentations, as well as expressions of appreciation for completed student work. Voice mails were also exchanged between the faculty member and the participating organization.

Student effort

While the additional effort on the part of the participating faculty member is noted, comments from student reflection papers underscore student efforts and their appreciation for the experiential learning opportunity.

> "I have to say that we worked hard and gained a lot out of this marketing project. I feel as if everyone worked their hardest and I felt like we all grew as marketers as well by doing this project" - Student N

> "I would have to commend our class for being able to work as a group to pull all of this together."- Student M

> "Overall this was a fun project and helpful for students to learn more about marketing and the art of presentation....My class is very lucky to have this real world opportunity." - Student K

Students also reported increased confidence in both presentation and research skills as a result of the experiential learning project.

Conclusion

While, implementing an experiential learning project in a Principles of Marketing course may be a challenge; the benefits to students of such projects are numerous. Not only can comparable student outcomes be achieved based on traditional measures, such as tests and exams, experiential projects can provide students with the opportunity to engage in problem solving with organizations within their community. Additional time and effort on that part of students may be required when they are participants in an experiential learning project. This is due to simultaneous learning and application of marketing concepts. Faculty should also expect to devote additional time to implementing an experiential learning project within a Principles of Marketing course. Importantly, in order to ensure timely completion of tasks continuous and real time feedback to students during the project is essential. Faculty will likely be tasked with communicating more frequently with students when an experiential learning project in implemented within their course (versus when a traditional project is implemented). Additionally, faculty should prepare for the added responsibility of communicating with the participating organization on an ongoing basis to ensure that deliverables are relevant and aligned with the organization's expectations.

Implications

The inclusion of experiential learning projects in the marketing curriculum within the Principles of Marketing course provides students with the opportunity to develop and apply newly acquired marketing knowledge and to develop their skills. Reserving experiential learning projects for upper level marketing courses could result in missed opportunities for active student learning and engagement. By providing students with experiential learning opportunities early in their academic careers students may not only learn and understand the importance of key marketing concepts and their application, but they will also have the opportunity to develop skills in other areas as well, such as presentation, research and critical thinking.

Limitations

There are limitations to this research study. The number of course sections and consequently the number of students included in this study is a limited. The comparative analysis should be repeated with data from additional sections of Principles of Marketing courses. Additionally, while the voice of the student regarding their experience with this experiential learning project is included through quotations from reflection papers, a quantitative measure of student opinions regarding the value of this project experience is absent from the study.

References

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This article is relevant to marketing educators and researchers as it highlights the opportunity for to engage with students in a Principles of Marketing course in an experiential learning project. Such projects allow students the opportunity to learn actively and to apply what they learn to real life project.

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