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Service-Learning Projects Enhance Student Learning in Strategic Management Courses

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Abstract

Academia has been criticized for its supposed isolation from society and its lack of emphasis on practical applications and hands-on experience. Institutions of higher education are responding to this criticism by incorporating experiential service-learning in their curricula. One business course which is particularly appropriate for integrating service-learning into the curriculum is Strategic Management.

Introduction

Over the years much criticism has been directed against academia arguing that it is inward focused and preoccupied with abstract ideas and fanciful ideals, that it has become isolated from the complex and dynamic social environment, and that its graduates lack the educational preparation for the real world. In response, many academic institutions in recent years have embarked on a soul-searching exercise to reconnect themselves with their original mission of preparing good citizens who possess practical skills and are able to utilize and promote knowledge for the improvement of a dynamic and diverse democracy [2].

Among the disciplines, business is critically positioned to play a significant role in academia's reconnection with society. Business, after all, can be considered as the applied part of the social sciences. Its subjects can be applied to all types of organizations regardless of whether they are for-profit or not.

Business schools have utilized a variety of ways to prepare their students for the real world. Some are using internships, where students are placed with companies to work in positions that allow them to apply what they learn at school. Others utilize executive-in-residence programs where current or retired corporate executives serve either as lecturers or mentors. Frequently these executives discuss with students the various challenges that their companies are confronting; the students are then asked to develop alternative courses of action [6]. Another common approach is to invite business people and other professionals as guest lecturers. Other institutions use service learning as a means to bring the world into the classroom and vice versa. Many colleges use a combination of these and other techniques.

Service-Learning Defined

In recent years business educators have sought ways to nurture the service commitments of their students while promoting interactions with their communities. Service-learning is a pedagogy that links community service with academic experience. It can be defined as learning by utilizing course assignments that give the opportunity to students to apply knowledge and skills taught in the classroom to projects benefiting the community. Although a seemingly simple task, service-learning encompasses several learning challenges since it is set up to create an interaction among students, teachers, and the community. It achieves this task by:

1. Sharpening the students' skills in applying academic knowledge to a practical "real world" setting.
2. Improving students' awareness of the community around them and helping them develop a greater sense of civic responsibility.
3. Changing the role of the teacher to that of an advisor to the student and the community.
4. Deepening the relationship between a university and a community that welcomes and appreciates the advice it is receiving.

The basic educational underpinnings of this learning method are based upon John Dewey's experience theory that considers education as a "deliberately conducted practice," and Paulo Freire's co-intentional education, where teachers and students together reveal and recreate reality [8]. This approach changes the passive learning of lecturing into the active learning of doing. Students experience the hard work, the trade-offs, the frustrations, as well as the rewards and satisfaction the real world has in store for them.

We can trace service-learning back to the beginnings of the twentieth century. The University of Cincinnati, Yale Law School and Rockefeller University have been identified as pioneering institutions of service learning. With the recent reemergence of the volunteering spirit in society, service-learning has thrived and prospered [8]. Indeed, the American Association for Higher Education has recently

published an eighteen-volume series addressing this issue. It includes a detailed description of how this method has been used across disciplines (9).

There are many interesting examples of service-learning applications within business schools. In accounting courses, students demonstrated to their community the importance of good accounting practices and how they help a business. In return, the students learned how to solve problems with imperfect information, while learning to interact with organizational personnel (3). In another example, project management students renovated houses for low-income senior citizens in Seattle. The participants found it necessary to utilize project management planning and control methods to complete the renovations in time (1). Russian and American students utilizing distance learning in an organizational communication class were placed in an orphanage in Russia and a nursing home in the U.S., respectively. The Russian team utilized its skills in organizing social and recreational events for the elderly, while the American team planned public relations events (7).

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Business Strategy and Service-Learning

One business course which is particularly appropriate for integrating service-learning into the curriculum is Strategic Management. This course is required of all students in virtually all business schools. Commonly referred to as the "capstone" course in the undergraduate and graduate curricula, it not only draws from its own body of knowledge but also utilizes and integrates the strategic concepts from all other business courses. Having developed their functional skills in previous courses, students are assigned to group projects that enable them to utilize these skills. Many professors give their students the option to develop and analyze business cases or be involved in service-learning.

Theory and Practice. The importance of strategic management for organizational success is now well acknowledged in the business world. Strategic vision and action are necessary to enhance competitiveness, achieve superior performance, and improve an organization's ability to meet its societal obligations. One of the major objectives of this course is to give students the opportunity to develop and appreciate strategic management skills needed by managers in all types of organizations. Course content focuses on developing an understanding of strategic management concepts, research, and theories. To bridge the gap between theory and practice, each class is divided into teams. When service-learning is integrated in the course, each team is required to perform a comprehensive strategic analysis of a business or organization in the community.

In recent years, the authors' students have conducted numerous such projects for various organizations. They include local blood banks, a Ronald McDonald House, a shopping center, a YMCA, small businesses, restaurants, and golf courses. Many of these organizations are performing so well that the owner/manager is unable to meet the growing demand for the organization's products or services, others are performing at a satisfactory level, and still others are experiencing serious difficulties.

The Strategic Analysis. The analysis is comprehensive and detailed. Students are required to follow a complex and creative intellectual process of examining the available data and information, applying strategic management concepts, and recommending strategic actions. They are challenged to use pertinent knowledge from other business courses, their experiences, acquired quantitative tools, communication skills, outside research, and creativity and ingenuity to formulate credible action plans. They are encouraged to determine what data are useful to impending decisions and what information is superfluous.

A review and critique of the organization's mission and objectives is followed by a comprehensive analysis of the external environment. Particular emphasis is placed on the competitive environment and the customers' or clients' expectations. Also, the organization's internal environment is considered. This includes an analysis of how well it is performing in the vital areas of marketing, management, operations, finance and, if applicable, information systems. In the financial area, various ratios (e.g., profitability, liquidity, activity, leverage) and trends are calculated and compared with industry averages. As a result, strengths and weaknesses as well as threats and opportunities are explicitly identified. Areas in which the organization can

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have a competitive advantage are then proposed. Finally, specific and practical recommendations in the various functional areas are provided.

Presentation of Results. When the project is completed near the end of the academic semester, the business owners/managers and their staff are invited to attend a detailed presentation of the students' report. Frequently, a highly informative discussion and an exchange of ideas take place during and after these presentations.

Outcomes of Service-Learning

The organization of the service-learning component of the Strategic Management course assures the achievement of several outcomes as defined by Giles [6]. The first involves **personal and interpersonal development**. There are two ways to reach this goal. The first is through student interaction with other students in a stressful environment, and the second is achieved through the students' interface with the organization. To facilitate group interaction, each group elects a leader whose role is to divide the work among the group members and coordinate the activities of the group. Each student's grade can be different from the group grade depending on his/her level of effort devoted to the project. To achieve this goal in an equitable way, the leader establishes a log stating when each member was assigned certain work, when the work was due, and whether the work was returned on time. It also includes an assessment of the quality of the work. Since group meetings are essential, the log contains group meeting dates, the names of participants, the names of those who are absent and a brief explanation of the reason for the absence. At the end of each group activity each member present signs the log. Each member then signs the participation sheet. A student's grade is determined by the group grade multiplied by each individual's relative contribution to the project. To facilitate the interaction of the students with the organization, the professor first establishes a relationship with its executives and reaches an agreement on what is to be expected from this collaboration. In addition, the professor must be present during all crucial meetings of the project team.

The second outcome of service-learning is **understanding and applying knowledge**. Students approach the projects by utilizing strategic management concepts such as goal development, strategy development, and benchmarking. Clearly, students are provided a unique opportunity to conduct a detailed strategic analysis of a real company or agency.

The third outcome involves **engagement, curiosity, and reflective practice**. At the beginning of the course, prior to their first visit, students tend to have a neutral attitude towards the project. Statements such as “I will do it because it is another class project” are common at this stage. Only when the students visit the organization, meet its representatives who explain their needs, and understand the project's potential impact do they become interested and involved. They realize that they can be the change agents, and begin to use phrases such as “we need to meet after work, after class, during the weekend.”

To facilitate the students' reflective mode, each group is required to turn in a written report of the service project and make an oral presentation to the class and representatives of the civic organization. Another copy of the written report is given to the civic organization. On the day of the oral presentation the group leader or co-leader hands to the instructor the logs and a report indicating the extent of each group member's contribution to the group effort.

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The fourth outcome involves **critical thinking**. As they face complex real-world problems, students are compelled to think critically, and are expected to develop creative solutions in a relatively short time. They are required to identify ways to find new resources, or to apply the existing ones in a more effective and efficient manner. They gain first-hand experience with the complexities and subtleties of organizational problems, issues, and opportunities. Many

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issues, which are normally discussed only in a classroom setting, are uncovered and examined. This is an excellent opportunity for the strengthening of conceptual, critical thinking, technical, and communications skills. Students experience the excitement and frustrations of contemporary organizational work and the unique problems of business management and entrepreneurship. Thus deeper insights are developed when real-world experiences and challenges are brought into the classroom.

A fifth outcome is **perspective transformation**. As they progress through the project, the students start realizing that their domain of applicable knowledge is not just a "business" but also any type of organization. In addition, they realize that their work is having a significant impact on others. Similarly, the instructor is provided with an exceptional learning experience. This helps the instructor to fully appreciate and respect the technical skills of the vast majority of these owners/managers as they struggle to manage a business without the administrative expertise and time to consider the strategic implications of their actions.

The final outcome is **citizenship**. Service-learning projects allow students to have a better appreciation of their responsibilities as citizens. Through these projects, they realize that they represent their university, and are able to see how to allocate resources among competing claims and how they can improve their community. The university is provided with an opportunity to offer a service to the community and strengthen its links with potential employers of its students.

Factors Affecting the Quality of Service-Learning

Several important factors affect the quality of Service Learning.

1. Early participation of the professor. The professor has to establish contact with the organization, evaluate its needs to determine whether they are relevant to the skills and knowledge taught in the course, and estimate the time and effort required to complete the project.
2. Professional interaction. The students as well as the organization's representatives have to interact with each other in a mutually respectful and professional way.
3. Project focus. As the students get involved in the project they tend to want to expand its focus. Sometimes this is necessary, other times it is not. Everyone has to keep in mind the time constraints student face in completing the project.
4. Commitment to the project. The organization's managers should be fully committed to the project. Frequently, service-learning requires their participation in meetings and involvement in providing the relevant information and access to facilities. At times, these leaders do not appreciate what is involved in such a project and all the work that is required. The students, in turn, are prone to lose enthusiasm.
5. Student recognition. Managers should recognize the students' efforts and contribution. This recognition motivates the students to work harder and helps attract future participants to these types of projects [5].

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Conclusion

Vigorous criticism and debate have focused on academia's isolation from society and its lack of interest on practical applications and hands-on experience. Institutions of higher education have responded to this criticism by incorporating experiential learning in their curricula. They have embraced the use of service-learning through civic engagement as a means of enhancing student learning and preparing students to address complex business and societal issues.

The major beneficiaries of this approach are the students and the community they serve. Students have the opportunity to implement knowledge taught in class within the real world environment. Not only do they put the theory learned in the classroom into practice, they also bring the lessons learned from the experience back to the classroom, thus enriching the learning environment for their fellow students. They learn the challenges and constraints they will be facing in the "real" world while experiencing the satisfaction of making a difference within their community. This deepens their understanding of what they know, how the world around them works, and their responsibility to the local community.

Students participating in service-learning indicate that this teaching approach has a positive effect upon their personal and academic development, and that it improves their social consciousness. Professors have found that service-learning improves their teaching effectiveness and professional development, and helps fulfill their university's mission.

Continued use of service-learning will help generate students' awareness of the contributions they can make to their communities. It will ensure that academic programs prepare business students adequately for the challenges of the 21st century.

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