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Recommended Citation

Swinarski, Matthew E.; Noce, Kathleen; and Parente, Diane H., "Developing Social Responsibility: Impact of IS Service Learning Projects" (2008). *ICIS 2008 Proceedings*. 111.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis2008/111>

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DEVELOPING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: IMPACT OF IS SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

Le Développement de la responsabilité sociale : l'impact des projets d'apprentissage par le service communautaire dans le domaine des systèmes d'information

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Research has shown service learning to have an impact on the development of students' professional knowledge and skills as well as their social awareness. However, there has been limited empirical research conducted regarding the benefits of service learning in the area of IS. Unlike service learning projects in other disciplines, where the service activity facilitates direct contact between the student and the individual being helped; IS service projects tend to focus on helping the organization better service the individual in need of assistance. Thus the student has an indirect, rather than direct, impact on the individuals being served. Given the indirect nature of these IS service projects, it is not clear if these projects generate any additional benefits over other pedagogical approaches and/or provide students an increased social awareness. Therefore the goal of this research project is to investigate whether IS service learning projects increase students' sense of social responsibility.

Résumé

Les recherches ont démontré l'impact que l'apprentissage par le service communautaire peut avoir sur le développement des connaissances, des compétences, et de la conscience sociale des étudiants. Puisque les projets d'apprentissage par le service dans le domaine des systèmes d'information ont de par leur nature une influence indirecte, cette recherche a pour but de déterminer si de tels projets réussissent effectivement à promouvoir un sens de responsabilité sociale.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, IS Education, IS Development

Introduction

The first few years of the 21st century has seen society plagued by corporate scandal and greed. In 2000, the Securities and Exchange Commission filed a complaint against the Xerox Corporation claiming the company defrauded investors from a period around 1997 through 2000. In 2001 Enron, once a world leader in electricity and natural gas, filed for bankruptcy after it was revealed that it too defrauded investors through deceptive accounting practice. In 2002, in the wake of the Enron scandal, investigations into Arthur Andersen's questionable accounting practices revealed more fraudulent activity associated with clients like Waste Management and Sunbeam. The largest perpetrator was WorldCom which eventually filed for bankruptcy. As a response to the increased number of corporate scandals, the United States government enacted the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 which mandates companies to conduct their accounting and business practices in a more socially responsible manner.

However, companies such as The Gap Inc., General Mills, Green Mountain, Hewlett-Packard, Procter & Gamble, Motorola, and Starbucks have been very socially responsible companies. These companies, as well as others, are "doing well" by "doing good" (Falck et al. 2007). Current research shows that making a profit and being more socially responsible are not mutually exclusive. A study by Verschoor and Murphy (2002) found that of the top 100 socially responsible companies, as identified by *Business Ethics* magazine, 77% appeared in the S&P 500, 64% in the Fortune's top 500 and 68% were on Fortune's list of most admired companies in the United States. Studying the U.S. commercial banking industry, Simpson and Kohers (2002) found empirical evidence supporting a link between a bank's social performance and the bank's financial performance. Orlizty et al. (2003), in a meta-analysis of 52 studies, showed past research suggests a positive correlation between corporate social/environmental performance and corporate financial performance. Using a data set containing 469 of the S&P 500 companies, Waddock and Graves (1997) examined not only if a positive linkage between social responsibility and financial performance existed but also investigated the casual relationship (social responsibility => financial performance or financial performance => social responsibility). Their analysis revealed a positive relationship between social responsibility and financial performance. They also found evidence that suggested social responsibility does influence financial performance, with the reverse casual relationship also being true. While some academics are still not sold on the idea that corporations benefit financially by being more socially responsible, most academics agree that acting in a socially responsible way does not hurt the company's bottom line (Margolis et al. 2008).

So what is corporate social responsibility really and how do we, as IS educators, instill social responsibility in our students? One of the more modern definitions of corporate social responsibility states it is "the obligation of the firm to use its resources in a way to benefit society, through committed participation as a member of society, taking into account the society at large and improving welfare of society at large independent of direct gains of the company" (Kok et al. 2001, p. 288). Another definition by (Carroll 1991, p. 43) states it is the firm's responsibility to "make a profit, obey the law, be ethical and be a good corporate citizen." The basic theme of these definitions is that in "doing well" for yourself, you should be "doing good" for others. This theme has also been at the cornerstone of academia, however, some scholars have expressed concerns that there is a growing gap between academia's commitment to serving its internal needs and serving the needs of society (Zlotkowski 1996). But more and more researchers believe the pedagogy of service learning can ensure we, as educators, are fostering graduates who will participate in society activity, honorably and ethically (Dipadova-Stocks 2005; Godfrey 1999; Kolenko et al. 1996; Zlotkowski 1996). Therefore, this study investigates whether IS service learning projects increase a student's sense of social responsibility. Before describing the context of the study and how it is being done, an introduction to the pedagogy of service learning and the impact of business related service learning on social responsibility will be provided.

Service Learning

Service learning as a pedagogical approach is a form of experiential learning (Godfrey 1999; Kolenko et al. 1996; Lester et al. 2005). The Academy of Management defines service learning as "an academically rigorous instructional method that incorporates meaningful community service into the curriculum. Focusing on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility, service learning involves students in organized community service that address local needs, while developing their academic skills, respect for others, and commitment to the common good." Godfrey (1999) proposed that the service learning pedagogy differs from other forms of experiential learning in three key aspects: (1) the benefits from the service must reciprocal – that is both server and the served get something

out of the experience, (2) student learning is based in part on reflection – that is students spend structured time connecting and integrating course material and the service experience and (3) students develop greater social awareness – the hope is that through the act of service, students develop the knowledge, attributes and skills to be responsible citizens of society.

Service learning projects are often confused with client-based projects and volunteerism, however, client-based projects do not always address an authentic community need and student volunteerism does not always integrate the service activity with course content. McCarthy and Tucker (2002) identified three criteria used to qualify a project as a service learning projects: (1) the project tasks are directly tied to course concepts, (2) the project is for a non-profit organization serving the community, and (3) students are required to reflect on their experiences.

Other key elements of service learning projects are:

- Students are actively involved in the selection, design, and implementation of the service project.
- Community partners are actively involved in identifying genuine needs, providing guidance, and contributing towards the completion of the service project.
- Assessment of student performance/project outcomes are done from both an academic and social perspective.

The service learning research as it relates to business can be organized into three major themes: (1) promoting the benefits of service learning (Dipadova-Stocks 2005; Easterling et al. 1997; Godfrey 1999; Godfrey et al. 2005; Kenworthy-U'Ren 1999; Kolenko et al. 1996; Zlotkowski 1996), (2) descriptions of how to integrate service learning into the curriculum or a course (Coffey et al. 2006; Gujarathi et al. 2002; Hagenbuch 2006; Hervani et al. 2004; Hoxmeier et al. 2003; Kenworthy 1996; Klink et al. 2004; Kohls 1996; Lamb et al. 1998; McGoldrick 1998; McGoldrick et al. 2000; Papamarcos 2002; Papamarcos 2005; Petkus 2000; Schaffer 2004; Still et al. 2004; Tschopp 2004; Weber et al. 2003), and (3) the impact of the service learning on the various stakeholders (students, faculty, university, non-profit service organization and the community) (Lester et al. 2005; Madsen 2004; Madsen et al. 2006; McCarthy et al. 1999; McCarthy et al. 2002; Rose et al. 2005; Weber et al. 2003; Wittmer 2004). This research is associated with the last theme, specifically the impact of service learning project on the student sense of social responsibility.

Service Learning Impact on Social Responsibility

Given the goal of service learning is to (1) help students develop skills related to their field of study and (2) enable students to make a positive impact on society; it is not surprising that most empirical studies on service learning outcomes relate to one of these broad objectives. For example, business related outcomes include discipline specific skills in the areas of marketing, operations, accounting, and IT; in addition to general business skills such as leadership, communication, and critical thinking. Several studies have found a link between service learning and the development of both specific and general business skills (Brown 2000; Bush-Bacelis 1998; Gujarathi et al. 2002; Hagenbuch 2006; Kenworthy-U'Ren 2003; Lester et al. 2005; Madsen 2004; Madsen et al. 2006; Rose et al. 2005; Still et al. 2004; Tucker et al. 2001; Tucker et al. 1998). Social outcomes from service learning include attitudes toward service provisioning (McCarthy et al. 1999), business and social ethics (Weber et al. 2003), citizenship (Lester et al. 2005), intention to participate in community service (McCarthy et al. 2002), and life-time commitment to community service (Wittmer 2004).

The theoretical justification linking service learning to discipline skills is based on Kolb's (1984) experimental learning model. However, Delve et al.'s (1990) Service Learning Model - which draws on Perry's (1970) Cognitive Development Model, Kohlberg's (1975) Moral Development Model and Gilligan's (1982) Model of the Development of Women's Moral Judgment - describes how an individuals' social awareness changes as a results of community service involvement. They propose that individuals change their attitudes, and ultimately behavior, regarding service to society in phases. The phases are exploration, clarification, realization, activation, and internalization. Individuals at the beginning phase of exploration have little or no focus on the value of service work and, in fact, are relatively naïve about the problems facing others. Individuals who proceed to the last phase of internalization ultimately develop a mindset where community service is now a way of life. Thus, the Service Learning Model proposes that involvement in community service coincides with an increased level of social awareness. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: IS service learning projects increase student's sense of social responsibility

This social development is moderated by four key variables: intervention, commitment, behavior, and balance (Delve et al. 1990). Intervention is described by mode and setting. Mode refers to if the service engagement is done as an individual or within a group. Setting is described as indirect/non-direct or direct. These categories involve the extent of interaction or involvement with the service providing organization and the service recipients. In a direct setting the student has face-to-face interaction with the ultimate clients of the service organization. In an indirect/non-direct setting the student does not have direct contact with the individuals being served.

Commitment to the service activity is described by the frequency (how often the student engages in the service activity) and duration (how long the student engages in the service activity). Behavior, or behavioral motivation, is defined by needs and outcomes. Needs refer to intrinsic motivations that students have for engaging in service. Outcomes refer to extrinsic motivation or the benefits that the service provider might receive from participation. The final key variable, balance, is classified into challenges and support. Challenges are obstacles that would prevent one from becoming involved in community service while supports are mechanisms that provide a way to overcome the challenges. Ultimately, a positive balance is a state in which the supports outweigh the challenges such that community service becomes a way of life.

Since the intervention variable for all student subjects involved in this study is constant we hypothesize the following based on the remaining moderating variables:

Hypothesis 2: The impact of IS service learning projects on student's sense of social responsibility is moderated by the student's commitment to the project.

Hypothesis 3: The impact of IS service learning projects on student's sense of social responsibility is moderated by the student's behavioral motivation.

Hypothesis 4: The impact of IS service learning projects on student's sense of social responsibility is moderated by the student's ability to effectively balance personal challenges associated with community service through supporting mechanisms.

Study Design and Method

Participant

Approximate 60 undergraduate students in a third year web design course offered by a small university setting will participate in the study. The course is an optional course historically predominately populated by students with a major or minor in MIS; however, students majoring in marketing, computer science, communications and software engineering have also been interested in the course.

Description of the Course and IS service Learning Projects

Course Objectives

This course is designed to provide students the opportunity to examine web design and administration. The planning, marketing, creation, design, and implementation of websites are a fundamental aspect of internet-based activities. In this course, students have the opportunity to obtain a solid understanding of some of the tools and techniques used to establish a web presence. Student outcomes related to specific course content are as follows:

- Describe how to plan a web site using the rules for professional web design
- Explain the importance of web usability, web standards, search engine optimization, and color theory
- Design an individual and client logo using Photoshop
- Explain Client-side programming such as JavaScript, XML, XHTML, DHTML, and other tools for website development and implementation

- Describe the setup of a domain and internet service provider
- Demonstrate the ability to work independently and with other team members to complete all phases of a design project
- Design a client site using web development tools such as DreamWeaver, Flash, and CSS
- Describe how to move a website to a live server and how to manage and administer the website with a content management system

Service Learning Project Process

The service learning project provides students the opportunity to develop a website for nonprofit organizations. Students learn how to use website design tools and techniques to assist a nonprofit organization in establishing an appropriate and professional presentation on the web or assist the organization in improving their current website through new design, changes in the current design, and improved marketability. Student experiences are not limited to the design and implementation of a website, but include the opportunity to work within a team, to understand the frustrations and benefits of working with clients who may not understand the value of a website or the issues that go along with creating an appropriate presentation of the organization via the web.

The clients are nonprofit organizations with limited or no financial or technical resources for the development of a website to promote their organization. Course projects are part of an outreach program founded in 2001. Initially, potential nonprofit clients were solicited through advertisements in the local newspaper and on the local radio station. Although these outlets were beneficial initially, word of mouth is now the primary means of obtaining new clients. The success of previous website projects has been the greatest generator of new projects.

Before being assigned a project the non-profit organizations initially meet with the instructor to go over needs and expectations. Students are put into groups of two and informed about the various project options for the course. Each group is permitted to request their top three client choices and are most often given one of the choices. Two groups are assigned per client to increase client selection options and the competition among groups.

Meetings with clients to obtain information using a predesigned planning form occur at the beginning of the semester. At this time students obtain content and graphics from the client. If necessary, students develop a logo for the client. After information is gathered from the client during the first planning meeting, students develop the graphical design template using the parameters provided on the planning form.

Once the template is approved by the instructor, the students finalize the design and add the content they have. They also develop a planning document which the client may use for future growth. In this document groups present a SWOT analysis of the site they completed, discuss any challenges they faced and challenges they feel the organization may face and must address to ensure the site is going to meet the needs of the organization. Additionally, they offer suggestions for future growth of the site.

At the end of the semester, students evaluate each other on their commitment and contribution to the project. Clients are invited to a presentation where groups present the website and their suggestion for future growth of the site. The clients evaluate the websites as well as the presentations. They then choose the site they prefer. On occasion they indicate they would like a combination of both. In addition, after every major deliverable, each student is required to submit a short, maximum one-page, reflection on their service experience.

Course/Project Deliverables

Planning Deliverables:

- Description of project scope including purpose, target audience definition and design specifications
- Description of primary tasks and expected duration of each
- Assignment of resources within teams

Design Deliverables:

- Completed planning form

- Site layout form including navigation
- Site structure

Development Deliverables:

- Site template
- Style sheets
- Graphics and flash animation

Final Deliverables:

- Planning document
- Final Website
- Powerpoint presentation
- Student Evaluations
- Client Evaluations

Student Reflections

- After planning deliverables
- After design deliverables
- After development deliverables
- After final deliverables

Survey Development

The items to measure social responsibility were adopted from Reeb et al.'s (1998) Social Responsibility Inventory (SRI) instrument. The SRI is composed of five social factors: Altruism, Power for World Difference, Social Justice, Moral Obligation and Anti-materialism. Items to measure the student's behavioral motivation (needs and outcomes) were adopted from Raman et al. (2002). Self-reported measures of the student's commitment and balance will be taken from the student's final project report.

Future Plans

We have developed and administered the pre survey. The post survey will be administrated at the end of the term, prior to the conference. This pre and post design will allow us to determine if a change has occurred with respect to the students' social responsibility. Preliminary analysis of the result will be completed and presented at the conference.

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