Mission-Centric Learning: Developing Students' Workplace Readiness Skills

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We discuss and evaluate the implementation of a mission-centric course project that is strategically tied to learning outcomes important to colleges of business. Specifically, to support our college's mission, undergraduate students enrolled in a training and development class were tasked with applying course concepts to assess the need for, to design, and to deliver (to other business students) workplace readiness training. To aid other management educators interested in adopting similar strategically aligned and feedback-rich learning experiences, we outline and discuss relevant project planning, design, and facilitation issues, as well as present a summary of initial results derived from this project. *Organization Management Journal*, 12: 34–44, 2015. doi: 10.1080/15416518.2015.1004965

Institutions espouse high-sounding values, of course, in their mission statements, college catalogues, and public pronouncements by institutional leaders. The problem, however, is that these explicitly stated values—which always include a strong commitment to undergraduate education—are often at variance with the real values that drive our decisions and policies. The real issue in reforming undergraduate education . . . is to effect a better rapprochement between our explicitly stated values and the values that really drive our institutional policies and decisions. . . . Nowhere is this misplaced emphasis better illustrated than in the case of the curriculum. (Astin, 1993, p. 10)

As the opening quote illustrates, the link between an institution's mission and student learning outcomes is critical in supporting and implementing the intent of an individual college (Kerby & Weber, 2000; Legorreta, Kelley, & Sablynski, 2006). For many colleges of business, accreditation standards

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(e.g., from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, AACSB) have essentially mandated the creation of curricula and assessment plans that are mission driven (Legorreta, Kelley, & Sablynski, 2006). As AACSB claims, "The mission and strategic objectives set out the intentions of the school, and the learning goals say how the degree programs demonstrate the mission" (AACSB, 2007, p. 60).

In this article, we present a mission-centric course project that is strategically tied to learning outcomes important to colleges of business, namely, workplace readiness. Specifically, to support the mission of the authors' college of business, which calls for the development of students who are both academically prepared and work-world ready, undergraduate students in a training and development class actively apply course principles to assess the need for, to design, to deliver, and to evaluate relevant workplace readiness training to other business students. This course project represents an explicitly proactive and mission-yoked effort in course design, an attribute of well-designed business education curricula and initiatives, yet rarely pursued (Astin, 1993; Kleiman & Kass, 2007). The application project goes beyond other published human resource (HR) course activities, such as York and Barclay's (2012) art-based "origami training exercise," where students teach other students an origami and evaluate the training; instead, our mission-linked project engages students in a semester-long assessment of actual training needs and holds students accountable for designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating relevant workplace readiness skills training. As such, nothing in the outlined experiential project is hypothetical or short-lived, and the term-long project engages students as they assist the college in fulfilling its mission of producing workplace-ready graduates.

To provide appropriate context, we first review the workplace readiness literature and how experiential learning principles can be utilized to pursue this valuable learning outcome for business students (Taylor, 2003). Then we identify and discuss relevant project planning, design, and facilitation issues, and present a summary of initial results for our experiential project.

WORKPLACE READINESS: MISSION-CENTRIC LEARNING

Workplace readiness has garnered attention in broad-based research and practitioner outlets (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Zinser, 2003) but has received much less attention, surprisingly, in the business education literature. Workplace readiness refers to preparing university (or high school) students for the basic and applied skills they will need in the workplace. Unfortunately, anecdotal and research-based evidence all points to the critical deficits graduates possess and the need for remedial intervention. For example, a 2006 report entitled "The Workforce Readiness Report Card," released by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), concluded that students entering the workforce were lacking requisite skills (McLester & McIntire, 2006).

These skill deficiencies seem to have remained constant and show a long history. For instance, in 2001, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported on "workplace competencies" necessary for the knowledge economy, such as communication skills and problem-solving skills (OECD, 2001). Further, the Workforce Readiness Report Card (McLester & McIntire, 2006) found that while basic skills (reading, writing, and math) remain fundamental to workplace success, other applied skills—such as teamwork, professionalism, work ethic, self-direction, problem solving, written and oral communication, leadership, and critical thinking—were of even greater value to employers. As reported by McLester and McIntire (2006), the findings suggest that "there remain significant deficiencies among entrants at every educational level, especially in the areas of written and oral communications and general workplace professionalism, including leadership abilities. Beyond that, it's troubling that the majority of college graduates remain just 'adequate' rather than 'excellent' in key skills areas" (para. 9). In terms of professionalism, particular skill deficits reported by employers include punctuality, courtesy, appropriate attire, and even basic table manners (McLester & McIntire, 2006). Similarly, a survey conducted in 2008 found that "U.S. employers continue to struggle with an ill-prepared workforce, finding new hires lack crucial basic and applied skills" (Casner-Lotto, Rosenblum, & Wright, 2009). As such, in 2009 the *Journal of Management Education* published a collection of articles on "Developing Competencies for Professional Performance" (see Schmidt-Wilk, 2009). More recently, a study by Jackson and Chapman (2012) found that some nontechnical skill gaps have narrowed while others remain wide. While parts of the Jackson and Chapman (2012) study are encouraging, the lack of more research on workplace readiness skills highlights areas needing attention, such as critical thinking and decision making. From this recent publication it is also apparent that these skill gaps go beyond the U.S. higher education system and extend to other "culturally similar economies" such as in Australia and the United Kingdom (Jackson, 2010; Jackson & Chapman, 2012).

A stream of research parallel to the workplace readiness literature delves into the relationship between work experience and managerial competencies, removing education from the picture (Dragoni et al., 2009). This research focuses on the need for developing managerial talent (those already employed), given the current economic and competitive complexity (e.g., Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). Bridging these ideas, Mintzberg has written prolifically on the divide between the practice of management and the teaching of management. In the introduction of his 2004 book, Mintzberg begins, "This is a book about management education that is about management. I believe both are deeply troubled, but neither can be changed without changing the other" (2004, p. 1). Mintzberg echoes other researchers' frustration with management education as we force the complexity of managing people into the rigidity of the scientific method (Ghoshal, 2005).

Given this context, some universities are responding to the clarion call for better-prepared graduates and some publishers have even taken action with their textbook line-up. Florida International University, for example, underwent a major redesign of its undergraduate business curriculum focusing on career-related skills in order to give its marketing majors a competitive advantage in the workplace (Taylor, 2003). Similarly, Houghton Mifflin Company launched the textbook *From Master Student to Master Employee*, designed to help undergraduates understand the connection between classroom skills and application of these skills to the workplace (see Business Wire, 2005).

In the present study, the authors' college of business has understandably committed to improving students' workplace readiness skills by making this a strategic goal, as directly stated in its mission. This skills component of the mission was officially adopted and formalized out of an extensive "positioning" exercise. In an effort to differentiate the college, focus-group feedback was gathered from current students, potential students and parents, current employers, and potential employers, both locally and regionally. The outcome of the exercise was the emphasis on both academics and work-world ready skills. To this point, there have been several college initiatives to improve workplace skills, but most have involved the creation of new programs requiring extensive resources. Thus, the course project discussed in this article represents a strategic learning intervention (Noe, 2010) that is intentionally and explicitly tied to the strategic intent of the organization, as the mission of the college is to distinctively develop students who are both academically solid and work-world ready. We believe that some of our lessons learned, as well as our general process approach to the linking and designing of an experiential learning project, can be helpful for others looking for greater student engagement and course-embedded curricular changes specifically tied to their college mission.

Experiential Learning

The mission-centric course project was designed based upon experiential learning principles. Following Kolb's work we define experiential learning as "knowledge created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p. 38) and emphasize the applied nature of the experience. According to documented research evidence, experiential learning can improve course-relevant skill proficiency (e.g., Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Madsen & Turnbull, 2006; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Tucker, McCarthy, Hoxmeier, & Lenk, 1998). Learning in an experiential format also promotes student growth and development, emphasizes practical relevance, and contextualizes student learning (Clark, 2000; Devasagayam & Taran, 2009; Dewey, 1938; Illeris, 2007). Experiential learning components in college courses are designed to fulfill learning needs by pairing academic rigor with practical relevance (Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005), going beyond superficial learning. Indeed, adult learning theories emphasize the importance of practice opportunities in order to ground individual learning (Knowles et al., 2005).

Several examples of experiential learning have been documented in HR education. For example, Morgan (2011) outlines a hands-on application project where students collect job analysis information, determine the required knowledge and skills, create a job description (including needs for accommodation), design job-related interview questions, and choose a job-related selection test. Gruys and Stewart (2007) detail a series of experiential homework exercises and cases in the areas of equal employment opportunity, selection, and performance management to realistically simulate work of an entry level HR professional. Also, Mello (2010) outlines a field-based learning experience in which HR students can analyze an organization's HR practices and policies from a strategic perspective.

Regardless of the specific approach, key concepts in adult learning theory state that trainees' learning will be increased if they have a need to know, are given opportunities for practice, interact with others during learning, and receive specific feedback (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In this article, we draw on the adult learning literature for its emphasis on learner focus where the "teacher" acts as a supporter. By utilizing this perspective we can link the "hands-on" active engagement of experiential learning with the "student-centered" nature of andragogy. In sum, experiential learning provides a clear opportunity for students to link and integrate course concepts with concrete experience, which is necessary for authentic learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Smith & Van Doren, 2004).

Training and development, the course housing the project discussed in this article, can be taught with lectures, videos, and hypothetical cases to cognitively tie steps of the overall corporate training process together; however, such approaches in contemporary HR education, and in management education in general, arguably lack realism and engaging practice to motivate undergraduate learners (Burke & Moore, 2003). Indeed, as

Billsberry and Birnik (2010) claim, management is a contextual practice that must be aligned with experience to perpetuate learning. Against this backdrop, we next identify and discuss specific project planning, design, and facilitation issues for this experiential project.

THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECT

An extensive experiential learning project was implemented in a senior-level training and development class at an AACSB-accredited business school in a southeastern U.S., urban campus. For the course, students were required to apply their knowledge of the documented training process as learned in class (Noe, 2010) in their semester-long application project. Each phase of the training process, needs assessment, design, development, delivery, and evaluation was broken down among five project deliverables. Ultimately, "short-burst" training seminars (i.e., training sessions lasting about an hour) were delivered by groups of enrolled students at the end of the semester to other students in the business school. Short-burst training was selected for the project for two reasons. First, logistically this worked best in a time-bound classroom setting, and second, short-burst training is often favored in corporate training since time away from work is minimized (Carmichael, 2010). The instructional intervention therefore was designed to provide multiple learning benefits for multiple campus constituents (Judge, 2006), including application of course learning for students enrolled in the training course, as well as learning in relevant skills, which represented deficit areas for other students in the college.

Various planning, design, and facilitation issues must be considered before embarking on such an extensive course project. Next, we present our overall framework used in planning and designing the course project, how we created and facilitated project deliverables, and finally an evaluation of the intervention from the attendee perspective as well as from our own reflection.

Planning and Designing the Course Project

In this section, presemester planning, course structure, and project details are discussed. Specifically, we explain how the project was designed within the overall structure of this undergraduate training and development course.

The first order of business was solidifying administrator support, which was trouble-free, given that workplace readiness is one of the strategic initiatives of the college, although coordination with other parties responsible for additional workplace readiness initiatives in the college was sought. Given clear support by the stakeholders (e.g., department chair, dean), a 3-credit hour afternoon time slot was requested for the training course in anticipation of groups of students needing to set up and deliver their ultimate training sessions. Thus, presemester communication and planning were needed.

TABLE 1
Syllabus description of the project

Goal of project: This course project will give you the opportunity to apply course training concepts. The target audience for the training will be other students at the university, and you will design, develop, and deliver an appropriate learning intervention to help improve their workplace readiness skills.

Workplace readiness: Workplace readiness skills address appropriate preparation of college students' basic and applied skills for the workplace.

Group formation process: The instructor will form the groups. Skills to be trained by each group will be based on ultimate needs assessment results.

Project deliverables: To apply the systematic process of training in order to teach students a "workplace readiness" skill in a short-burst format by: 1) applying rapid needs assessment, 2) creating a specific learning objective & instructional plan, 3) developing training materials & methods to support transfer, 4) delivering the training, & 5) then evaluating trainees' satisfaction & learning from your session.

Grading for project: The course project accounts for 37.5% of the final course grade. Each of the 5 project deliverables will be worth 7.5%—and each deliverable will be graded on:
- ○ execution of the specific deliverable's goals (i.e., did you do what was asked?),
- ○ accuracy and appropriateness of course concept application, and
- ○ grammar/spelling/organization (for any written submissions).

Peer inputs of member performance will be used as a part of grading for each deliverable; in other words, individual member scores may vary (up or down) from the group score assigned to any deliverable, based on themes/patterns in the peer review ratings and written comments.

Note. See appendix for peer rating forms.

On the first day of class, a description of the project was included in the syllabus (as seen in Table 1) and discussed with the students. Within the context of the course this experiential project was worth 37.5% of the overall course grade; thus, students had an adequate extrinsic incentive to perform well. Other graded events in the course were two exams worth 22.5% each (total 45%) and a Trainer Facilitation Activity worth 17.5% that was utilized as a skill builder for the larger experiential project. The experiential project was positioned as an opportunity to practice and apply course learning in a "hands-on" fashion and to become experts in a content area (i.e., workplace readiness skill) that would benefit those enrolled and others in the college.

Student groups were formed by the instructor using a developmental approach. At the beginning of the semester a "getting to know you" sheet was completed by each student. Students were asked to provide information about their current job or work experience, campus leadership roles, and skill strengths. Teams were formed in order to balance these components, along with demographic attributes (e.g., gender, age). Ultimately, there were five teams, of four students each. The project was broken down into logical deliverables—as outlined in Table 1— that are consistent with the multiphase training process taught in the course (i.e., needs assessment, course design, development of materials and transfer support, delivery, and evaluation of the training). Each of the five deliverables was weighted the same at 7.5%.

Facilitating Project Deliverables

Like other team projects, it is important for instructors to pursue a facilitative role in an experiential learning component so they do not micromanage students or let students wander aimlessly (Siciliano, 2001). This approach also coincides with the adult learning principle of being student centered (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). By divvying up the project into five smaller and more manageable deliverables, consistent with the step-by-step training process taught in the course, the project garnered incremental focus from each student group on each training phase.

A *needs assessment report* was the first project deliverable, in which groups were asked by the instructor to

> Describe the (anonymous) data collection methods and sources you used to assess Knowledge/Skill/Ability [KSA] gaps (desired vs. current skill levels) in students' workplace readiness skills. Analyze and summarize your findings in the report (including all raw data in an appendix). Effectively use graphs & charts to depict your findings. Lastly, based on the top KSA gaps you uncover, list the top 4 gaps your group is willing to train. No guarantee of top choice.

Clear from this description is that students' critical thinking skills are particularly invoked during the needs assessment project phase. Critical thinking refers to actively analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, and/or

communication (Scriven & Paul, 1996). As such, our project design builds in important opportunities necessary for students' skill growth in this area (Jackson & Chapman, 2012).

Helping students gather needs analysis data during class time was needed, given students' understandable concern with the amount of time that training needs analyses can require (McCarthy & Tucker, 1999). Two and a half classes were dedicated to discussing this "content" material and to groups working in class on this project deliverable, so that students could learn how to identify deficiencies and begin doing so for their project. To further facilitate this deliverable, guest speakers were invited to the classroom. Asked to visit were a local Chamber of Commerce representative, who had recently conducted workplace readiness focus groups with local business managers, and the college's Associate Dean of External Affairs, who was able to provide (regional) survey and interview results of current students' workplace readiness skill deficits. Content as well as question and answer sessions from these guests helped provide information about our students' existing workplace readiness skill deficits. Equipped with this knowledge and these examples, students further gathered interview and survey data from a sampling of college faculty, alumni in the region, and current students on the perceived workplace readiness skill gaps.

As such, students were armed with multisource needs assessment data for their first project deliverable. The needs analysis reports were graded by the instructor and constructive feedback was provided. Based on an in-class discussion of the students' needs analysis reports, the five top training needs were identified. Each of the five groups identified its top three preferences of topics/skills to train and was assigned either its first or second preference of training topics. The most needed workplace readiness skills included (for the semester in question) developing a professional image, negotiating starting salary in a job offer, handling tough interview questions, resumé creation and tips, and business dining etiquette. However, particularly notable about having students conduct a needs assessment each time the course is offered is that the project is yoked to current and emerging skill gaps.

The second deliverable for the course project, an *instructional plan*, required fulfillment of the following task:

> Applying the attributes of good learning objectives (as learned in lecture), list your specific, achievable learning goal(s) for your training session and develop a detailed instructional plan (see notes for template).

In this second deliverable, students worked in class (and outside of class) to write feasible learning goals for their 60-minute training seminar and to identify the specific adult learning principles and theories that would guide their training design. A class session was dedicated to adult learning principles and other learning theories necessary for this project. A detailed instructional plan was required in this second deliverable to get groups to focus on how they would wisely use time and active training methods (e.g., interactive role play, application exercises, video, etc.) to accomplish their intended learning goals. Again, the deliverable was graded by the instructor and feedback was given to each team to use in future deliverables.

In the third deliverable, teams had to *develop course materials* for their training session and were instructed to

> Develop and submit all training and learning materials that you'll be using in your session (e.g., handouts, visuals, learning aids, exercises, role plays, video clips, self-assessments, etc.). Outline specific transfer support aids/action plans you'll employ to ensure trainees will use your training in the future.

Turning instructional ideas into actual training materials required discipline, focus, and teamwork. At this stage a particular challenge for students was determining how much they could actually accomplish in a short 60-minute training format. As such, the more experienced students (and instructor) provided some guidance, but groups also practiced subsections of material to estimate time allotments. Two classes were dedicated to training methods, including application exercises. After submitting the third deliverable and receiving the instructor's graded and constructive feedback, teams were ready to develop their *training evaluation plan*, in which they had to

> Describe how you will realistically evaluate your session at Level 1 and Level 2. Provide a copy of each measure you'll use. [Note: You must ultimately execute your evaluation plan & submit an analysis of your results as outlined on the schedule.]

Designing a training evaluation plan that was practical yet effective for training evaluation purposes proved a challenging yet useful task. Knowing they would be judged and evaluated by other students attending their programs increased the accountability factor for each team. All groups were required to include in their evaluation plan measures of Level 1 (i.e., trainee satisfaction) and Level 2 (i.e., trainee learning), based on Kirkpatrick's four-level model (1994) of training evaluation, yet each group could create a customized evaluation form in order to assess its program's goals and effectiveness.

Groups also had to aggregate and analyze their evaluation results and submit a summary to the instructor. This approach was especially helpful in applying a classroom concept to the actual training event. Prior to the deliverable, Kirkpatrick's evaluation model was introduced and discussed in class with particular emphasis on Level 1, participant satisfaction, and Level 2, learning or increase in knowledge. For this course exercise we did not focus on Level 3, behavior, or on Level 4, results, as these levels were beyond the logistics (e.g., length) of the course. (Results of each team's performance, as judged by attendees, are discussed in the next section, as one measure of the effectiveness of this project.)

Extensive feedback was given to the students at each stage of deliverable and changes to "completed" deliverables were encouraged based on feedback. This process for deliverables 1–4 made deliverable 5 relatively straightforward. In the last

project deliverable, teams professionally *delivered their training seminars*. Training dates and times had been assigned prior on a random basis to the student groups, and practice time was allotted during class to pilot their program. Peer feedback was provided for the practice run, focusing on strengths and areas needing improvement.

The formal training sessions were then graded by the instructor based upon copious notes of the strengths and weaknesses of each program, ultimately providing this feedback to each group. A rubric was used identifying areas of strength and areas needing improvement (see appendix). The guiding criteria included "to what extent did the group effectively facilitate active learning, incorporate learning aids/acronyms, use visual aids effectively, and apply learning theories to increase learning." Feedback was also provided via anonymous evaluation surveys completed by each group's attendees.

Direct communication exchanges among teammates was encouraged and emphasized throughout the term to keep groups functioning effectively. An additional layer of behavioral feedback was also gathered in each group via peer ratings for each deliverable (see appendices for peer rating forms). Peer ratings were used to provide an individual component to the team project, thereby enhancing individual accountability for participating in each phase of the project, and were used to raise or lower an individual's team score, if necessary. Specifically, the evaluation at the end of each deliverable asked whether anyone in the group for that specific deliverable "went above and beyond," as well as whether anyone was a "social loafer/slacker." To enhance individual reflection and development, for any comments that were consistently stated by a

majority of team members—either positive or constructive—the instructor included a summary of such feedback, without disclosing member identity, along with the student's numeric score in Blackboard. Ultimately, only about 5–10% of scores on each deliverable were modified by the instructor (mostly up). The use of continuous feedback and the high "cognitive absorption" (Druskat & Kayes, 2000) created by this engaging semester project may be responsible for so few grade adjustments.

EVALUATION OF THE INTERVENTION

Given that data were gathered in the natural conditions of a real-life undergraduate program, students could not be randomized into the course and a control group was not used. Nonetheless, because workplace readiness interventions have not been formally documented in the business education literature, an exploratory investigation was conducted regarding the efficacy of the five seminars delivered (by five different student groups). To give the reader a sense of how effective the course project was and an idea of how worthwhile this project might be if pursued at other universities, initial findings are presented in this section, including evidence of attendees' satisfaction and learning, as well as instructor post hoc reflection on the overall project.

Attendee Evaluation

A summary of attendees' aggregate program evaluation data (i.e., from students who attended the various workplace readiness seminars) is included in Table 2. We only report quantitative data in Table 2; however, qualitative data were also

TABLE 2
Project evaluation for each workplace readiness training seminar

Training seminar	Level 1—Measures of trainee satisfaction[a]	Level 2—Measures of trainee learning[a]
Preparing for a job interview	4.76—Overall satisfaction with program 4.76—Trainers perceived as knowledgeable	94.1% of trainees had correct recall of learning acronym on posttest
Sealing the deal: Negotiating starting salary	88% of trainees agreed that trainers kept their attention 75% of trainees agreed that they felt involved in the training	100% of trainees had correct recall of learning acronym on posttest
Business dining etiquette	4.56—Trainers perceived as organized 4.61—Audiovisuals perceived as relevant	72.2% of trainees reported becoming more knowledgeable of dining etiquette
Resumé creation tips	4.47—Overall satisfaction with program 4.47—Trainers perceived as knowledgeable	Percent of trainees perceiving they possessed a good ability to prepare a resumé—retrospective pretest = 56% vs. posttest = 100%
Developing a professional image	73% of trainees reported being very satisfied with program content 66.6% of trainees reported being very satisfied with handouts and learning aids	98.6% of trainees had correct recall of learning acronym on posttest

Note. Trainee satisfaction and trainee learning measures were selected and developed by the individual project groups to emphasize student-directed learning.

[a]Groups were instructed in adult learning principles and encouraged to incorporate such principles in their measures.

gathered and used to improve the course project. Because each group in the class was asked to create a unique and customized evaluation form in order to assess its program's goals and effectiveness, the measures reported in Table 2 are not standardized. However, both Level 1 (trainee satisfaction) and Level 2 (trainee learning) measures (Kirkpatrick, 1994) were required from each group, and the same Likert-scale format was used across groups when a Likert scale was selected (i.e., 5-point scale with the same anchor point descriptions). Attendee evaluations were not directly included in team project grades, so there were no incentives for groups to encourage attendees to artificially inflate their evaluation ratings of the training.

As can be seen in Table 2 and from comments received from participants, most of the workplace readiness seminars were effective in several aspects, as judged by those who attended them. While some seminars (e.g., "Sealing the Deal" and "Resume Creation Tips") could have been more "hands on" to improve trainee satisfaction, most groups attempted to rigorously apply adult learning principles by providing practice opportunities, interaction among trainees, and involving trainees. For example, in the dining etiquette module, a complete and actual table setting with warm food was planned and utilized, and students practiced appropriate meat-cutting techniques, dinner conversation, and table etiquette skills for business dining. Also, most groups came up with clever acronyms to guide trainee learning on important take-away principles from their seminars, which proved useful for enhancing Level 2 measures of trainee learning (see Table 2 for measures of learning).

Instructor Reflection

Breaking the project down into five deliverables, each weighted the same, appeared to be one of the more effective choices made for project implementation because students focused on one relevant task at a time without getting overwhelmed. Specifically, a noticeable change occurred between deliverables 1 and 2 as the students settled into their new roles as class leaders and being "in charge" of their learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Additionally, once groups were assigned their specific training topic they became more focused and clear about their ultimate goal, thus reducing anxiety.

Small but important refinements have been made for clarity's sake to each of the project deliverable descriptions in the course syllabus. Much of this has been around data collection, analysis, and presentation of data. For example, students have been reminded that skill gaps must be grounded in and determined from the data gathered and analyzed, not personal assumptions. Deliverable 1 was also slightly modified to include examples of different data-gathering methods such as online survey software (SurveyMonkey), as well as reaching out to local managers and employers for their insights on our students' workplace readiness needs. Again, conducting a needs assessment each year the course is offered helps keep the project yoked to evolving skill gap deficits to reach "beyond the teacher and the classroom" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 200), unlike other learning tools such as simulations or cases that remain disconnected from "live" contextual influences.

In the latest semester of this course, another specific change for deliverable 4 was added: "Use a numerical Likert scale for assessing Level 1 outcomes and establish a grading rubric for acceptable Level 2 learning-based trainee responses." Beyond gathering the data, a further recommendation for deliverable 4 is to teach students how to best analyze and present trainee evaluation data in a summary fashion. It is risky to presume that students can effectively analyze training evaluation data and present it in a clear and meaningful way (Hayes, 2000, as cited in DeRycker, 2001). Often, data analysis and graphs in the students' evaluation plan lacked sufficient sophistication, making it difficult to understand their results. Although we will try to address this area of weakness in our class with additional support resources and tips, changes made beyond the course may also be necessary. One such option would be to add a statistics prerequisite for the training course, to drive home the importance of quantitative skills in evaluating HR interventions.

Beyond project refinements, one of the underlying post-project issues was the lower-than-expected attendee turnout across the training sessions. While course-enrolled students were encouraged to invite others to attend in order to learn valuable workplace skills, and were provided "gold tickets" to distribute, only a small number of trainees (who were not already enrolled in the training course) actually attended in the final training sessions. Informal discussions with course-enrolled students revealed that some had extended invitations and their invitees failed to show up, but many claimed that unless extra credit was awarded they would bypass inviting others. In the future, extra points could be offered, but a more promising idea being considered is having students conduct their workplace readiness sessions in our required one-credit hour Senior Seminar course to better diffuse the readiness training. Student interest may also evolve, given newly created rewards such as priority registration, recognition banquets, and a co-curricular "experience transcript" for university students actively engaging in experiential learning beyond degree requirements.

Upon reflection, a direct take-away from the instructor perspective is just how important the balance is between instructing and facilitating (Palmer, 1997). What seemed to occur in this class was a "passing of the baton." During classroom instruction the instructor was the driver in presenting information to the students, but the next stage in learning was for students to take ownership of that new knowledge and apply it to a real-world situation. Nevertheless, we encourage researchers in the future to incorporate longitudinal data of such classroom interventions to more reliably inform practice.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this article provides business educators a general model for creating and implementing a mission-centric experiential project strategically tied to outcomes important to colleges of business, such as workplace readiness skill enhancement. Future efforts to design mission-driven curricula that develop and measure learning outcomes of value to colleges of business not only can help satisfy accrediting bodies but also can ensure a cohesive and customized curriculum. For example, other business school mission statements express goals that could similarly be tapped with comparable projects, such as actively engaging students in developing relevant knowledge and skills (Ohio University), graduating students who possess critical thinking skills (Loyola University), or creating a student-centered learning community (Texas State).

As a contribution to the management education literature, this contextually yoked and feedback-rich project inherently stays in sync with evolving student skill needs. Further, compared to the commonly used "transmission" model of relaying fixed knowledge in higher education (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), our project invokes vital educational principles of "making space" for learners to take charge of their own learning, to engage in developing their own expertise, as well as the learning processes of thinking, feeling, acting, and reflecting (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). That is, instead of students merely proposing a training solution for a short-lived hypothetical case, our project authentically engages students throughout the entire semester so they experience every aspect of the instructional design process for an authentic training need and ultimately reflect upon their results.

Our general approach could be used in other business courses. For example, in a Strategic Management or senior capstone class, to build analytical skills students could be asked to analyze a "live" company and make recommendations for its future. This could entail gathering data on company strengths and weaknesses, interviewing employees, members of the community, and customers (deliverable 1). Deliverable 2 could then entail identifying feasible tactical approaches for using company strengths while diminishing their weaknesses. Deliverable 3 could be the planning and organization of a presentation of their recommendations to the company being analyzed, with deliverable 4 being an actual presentation to company executives. Evaluation of the recommendations could occur by measuring whether any of the recommendations were actually adopted or considered viable by the company (deliverable 5).

Furthermore, our general framework could be used for MBAs or in executive education, where critical-thinking skills drive curriculum goals. In such venues, more time and emphasis could be spent at different stages of project deliverables depending on the target group; for example, in a graduate training or HR class, measures of program evaluation might be expanded to include Level 3, as experienced participants are more readily afforded opportunities to apply management skills in their current job. In an MBA strategy class, more emphasis might be placed on the analysis and communication of findings (deliverables 1 and 5). At a minimum, other experiential projects in management classes (e.g., design of a recruiting strategy, a pay structure, a scheduling solution, a new database, etc.) could be developed with similar principles of breaking down the large project into manageable deliverables with feedback and student reflection incorporated throughout. Ultimately, instructors can choose to replicate our entire design or utilize specific design elements in their own course experiential projects in order to meet their specific needs.

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APPENDIX 1. PEER RATING FOR EACH PROJECT DELIVERABLE

Your Name:_____

1. All members contributed equally to and for deliverable #__?   *YES   or   NO*
   If you responded "no," then answer the next 2 questions. If "yes," just turn in this sheet.
-Who, if anyone, in your group went "above and beyond" for deliverable #__?
   .name_____ .specific, behavioral comments_____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

-Who, if anyone, in your group loafed/slacked for deliverable #__?
   .name_____ .specific, behavioral comments_____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

*Was specific, behavioral feedback provided to team members regarding ALL comments above? Yes *or* No_____.
   Please know that failing to provide necessary feedback is unacceptable for managers in the workplace as well as for students in group projects.

APPENDIX 2. OVERALL PEER RATING

Your Name_____

Please write the names of all of your team members, INCLUDING YOURSELF, and rate the degree to which each member fulfilled his/her responsibilities in completing the team assignments. DO NOT LEAVE COMMENTARY BLANK! Place this form in a sealed envelope, with your team name/number on the outside, and give it to your instructor. The possible ratings are as follows:
   These ratings should reflect each individual's level of participation, effort and sense of responsibility, not his or her academic ability.

- **Excellent:** Very responsible, prepared, and cooperative**.** Consistently carried more than his/her fair share of the workload.
- **Very good:** Consistently did what he/she was supposed to do, prepared, and cooperative.
- **Satisfactory:** Usually did what he/she was supposed to do, acceptably prepared and cooperative.
- **Deficient:** Often failed to show up or complete assignments, rarely prepared.
- **Unsatisfactory:** Consistently failed to show.

Name of team member	Rating	Explanation (specific, behavioral comments)
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

APPENDIX 3. DELIVERABLE #5 GRADING RUBRIC AND FEEDBACK FORM

Workplace Readiness Training—Skill:_____
Group:_____
e.g., To what extent did the group, via employing course concepts, effectively:

- facilitate active learning
- incorporate learning aids/acronyms

- use visual aids effectively
- apply learning theories to increase learning
- invoke the use of other relevant course concepts

Specific Strengths	Specific Areas Needing Improvement

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