MANAGING CLIENT-BASED LEARNING: INSIGHTS FROM SUCCESSFUL TEACHING PROJECT COURSES IN MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

Experience-based learning (EBL) is an increasingly prominent feature of courses offered at major business schools. The benefit to students from making EBL a priority is clear - research into the outcomes of EBL generally finds that it yields greater understanding, retention, and eventual application on the job than conventional learning approaches. Teaching a course with a significant EBL component, however, presents different challenges than teaching a conventional course. Insights gained from designing/teaching project courses and successfully participating in national project course competitions are discussed. Factors most instrumental in influencing the project course experience are proposed. These insights should be useful to business educators who anticipate designing and implementing successful project courses.

INTRODUCTION

Educators constantly strive to find more effective teaching strategies and techniques. Better student attention and motivation, greater understanding and retention of course material, along with the increased ability to successfully apply theories and concepts to real-world situations are all worthwhile goals of more effective teaching. Experience-based learning (EBL) is one well-known model that purports to help educators meet many of these teaching challenges (Frontczak, 1995). Silberman (2007) defines EBL as "learning in a situation that *resembles* the [eventual] work environment." Keeton and Tate (1978) describe EBL as those learning situations where the "learner is *directly* in touch with the realities being studied." EBL involves "*direct* encounter with the phenomenon being studied, rather than merely thinking about the encounter or only considering the possibility of doing something with it." Beard and Wilson (2006) include instructional contexts such as reflecting on past events, reinterpreting them based on further experience, and analyzing future scenarios within their definition of EBL. Kolb (1984) proposes an Experiential Learning Cycle that begins with (1) experiencing/noticing some phenomenon, (2) interpreting/reflecting on it, (3) generalizing/judging what took place, and finally (4) applying/testing what has been learned.

In addition, there are both cognitive and emotional elements of EBL – as experienced by the student (Andresen, Boud and Choen 2000). EBL can offer greater cognition than conventional business learning through (1) the immersion experience itself, (2) the first-hand exposure to real world business practices, and (3) the opportunity for engagement with company personnel, customers, and classmates as an integral part of the learning experience. Moreover, some experience-based learning contexts can have a clear emotional element as well (Hoover, 2007). Highly effective forms of EBL can involve students (1) empathizing with the company/organization, (2) experiencing some of the risks associated with the firm and its decision-making processes, (3) identifying with the company's issues, and internalizing some of the organization's methods and processes. Experience-based learning may offer the richest learning experience when the learner *thinks and feels* like an organization's stakeholders, acts in their best interests, and receives commensurate rewards or penalties for their efforts (Gentry and McGinnis, 2009). It gives students a broader perspective on their discipline and allows them to model the types of work activities they will experience on the job (Skinner et al., 1999).

Given the broad range of definitions for experience-based learning, it is not surprising that many different methods are used by business educators to carry it out. EBL approaches can range from basic techniques such as case studies and field trips, to more complex techniques such as simulations or class projects. Perhaps the highest level of experience-based learning – with the potential for providing both the cognitive and emotional benefits discussed above – takes place in the context of a "project course." A project course is not the same as a class project. The project is not simply one component of the student's overall evaluation in a given class; instead, the project is the entire class. The learning objectives and outcomes are entirely encompassed by the project around which the class is designed (Thomas 1998). The experiential team project benefits students by allowing them to learn and apply new skills as well as reinforce knowledge acquired in prior courses (Craciun, Corrigan 2009). The project focuses on questions or problems that drive students to encounter the concepts and principles of a discipline, and the project outcomes are student-driven instead of instructor-driven. As such, a well-designed and managed project course offers positive learning outcomes well beyond those offered by non-EBL or lower level EBL approaches.

AN "EXPERIENCE-BASED" VIEW OF EBL

For 11 consecutive semesters, the College of Business Administration at a major U.S. university has offered a three credit marketing elective called *Projects in Marketing*. Each semester the class is "hired" by a prestigious real-world client, and asked to develop, propose, implement and evaluate a marketing campaign that addresses a specific set of marketing objectives. Clients have included Citibank, the Central Intelligence Agency, Chevrolet, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), American Century Investments, Honda, Goal Financial, the U.S. Navy, the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), Nissan, American Eagle Outfitters, and a major professional sports franchise. The class organizes itself into a fully functioning marketing agency that mirrors how a real world agency would approach and manage a client assignment. Class deliverables typically include conducting focus groups, developing sampling plans, fielding, coding and analyzing quantitative market research surveys, developing campaign themes, planning and implementing campus events, developing and implementing advertising plans using both traditional and non-traditional media, designing proprietary websites, writing press releases, preparing media kits, generating positive publicity both on and off campus, managing budgets, and making formal presentations to the client. Students in the class benefit from the exposure they receive to the real world complexities of marketing decision-making (Henke, 1985).

The *Projects in Marketing* class has been an overwhelming success as judged by students, employers and clients. Student course evaluations hover consistently at the highest end of the measurement scale. Students routinely comment that the *Projects in Marketing* class has been both the most valuable as well as the favorite class taken during their college programs of study. Graduates also report that the class (specifically highlighted on their resumes) is often discussed with potential employers during job interviews – who see the experience gained in project classes as a better indicator of employability than conventional classroom experiences (Barr and McNeilly, 2002). Students report that employers see the class as a tangible means to discriminate between applicants whose resumes otherwise look very similar. A graduate of the class who recently secured employment with a full-service advertising agency, when asked to comment on the role that the class played in her job search, responded by saying, "The experience sticks out to companies because not many recent graduates have had the opportunity to put all of their individual classes into one comprehensive experience that's not just a bunch of graded assignments. When I was interviewing, all the people I talked with always came back to the American Eagle project to know more – what I learned, how we came up with campaign ideas, team dynamics, work flow, etc. It absolutely made a huge difference in getting this job." Perhaps most importantly, verbatim comments from *Projects in Marketing* graduates indicate that they have enjoyed consistently higher placement success than marketing students in general.

The clients themselves (i.e., the firms sponsoring the projects) have quite possibly gained the most. The target market specified by these clients is generally the Generation Y population on campus and in the surrounding region. Our client organizations realize the challenges associated with reaching and appealing to Generation Y – a segment of the overall population that consumes media and responds to marketing messages differently than other segments. Moreover, this age segment, numbering roughly 60 million nationwide, is prone to switch styles and brand loyalties faster than any other generation in history. Given this target's skepticism and mistrust of conventional media and message approaches, our clients have sensibly decided to invest in a peer-to-peer strategy for reaching this important target market. Rather than trusting that they can accurately understand and reach this segment on their own, they are using the Projects in Marketing class as a way to effectively hire Gen Y "consultants" to communicate with Gen Y on their behalf.

Most of our clients work with multiple universities around the country (usually ranging from 10-20) in a given semester. The schools chosen to participate are generally selected based on their geographic proximity to one of the client's priority market areas. In order to motivate the highest possible level of student effort on these marketing assignments, some clients hold a competition between the participating schools. Referred to as the Scholastic Achievement Award (SAA), these clients evaluate and recognize the top schools participating that semester. As part of the competition, the top two or three participating schools are generally invited to the client's headquarters to present their campaigns directly to the client's senior executives, who judge and rank their performance. A \$2,000 to \$5,000 cash award is presented to the most outstanding group of students. This university's *Projects in Marketing* class has worked with eleven different clients who have offered a Scholastic Achievement Award. In nine of the eleven cases, the focal university was one of the schools invited to participate in the final competition (in one of the remaining cases, only one school was invited, and the focal university was acknowledged to be the second best program). In six of these nine client engagements (Honda Fit, Goal Financial, Honda Accord Coupe, Nissan Cube, American Eagle Outfitters, and Chevrolet), the focal university was judged to have developed and implemented the most outstanding campaign among all participating schools nationwide. In the other two cases (American Eagle and the American Public Transportation Association), this university was awarded second and third place respectively.

In consideration of the success of this class, as measured by student, employer, and client feedback, a closer examination of the design and management of the class may be useful to marketing and other business educators planning to incorporate more EBL into their curricula. In

addition, key factors that may help explain the success that the focal university has enjoyed in the above noted multischool competitions are proposed and discussed.

A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT COURSE BLUEPRINT

Projects in Marketing is a stand-alone, three credit elective in the College of Business Administration marketing curriculum. Between 20 and 25 marketing students are recruited to take the class each semester. The client that the class works with is generally identified through an arrangement with EdVenture Partners – a California-based firm specializing in creating industry/education partnerships. The client (e.g., Honda, CIA) initially meets in person with the class at the beginning of the semester to introduce the specific assignment and to set the measurable objectives that the class will pursue. These objectives typically ask the students to conduct extensive marketing research with the target market (before, during, and after the campaign), develop an overall campaign theme, design and implement a set of advertising and public relations strategies, plan and implement a major campus event, and measure/evaluate the campaign's effectiveness. A $2,500 - $3,000 operating budget is provided to the class for allocation across its various campaign activities.

Subsequent to the initial meeting with the class, the client visits the class on at least two additional occasions. At a point 5-6 weeks into the semester, the client attends a "Marketing Strategy Meeting" (MSM) where the class formally presents and proposes its overall campaign strategy and the specific marketing tactics it plans to implement. The client approves, rejects, or requests modifications to these proposed plans and provides feedback to the class regarding its efforts to date. Based on this client feedback, the campaign is implemented and evaluated. The client then attends a formal final presentation where the students present their campaign deliverables along with a comprehensive summary of the campaign's performance in meeting the client's stated objectives.

Based on a successful track record of teaching this class over the past 11 semesters, seven important factors are proposed to contribute to the success of projects courses in general. In addition, three key factors are proposed and discussed as having the greatest influence on the focal university's track record of success in national EBL competitions.

1. Client Selection

Selecting the client for a project course is a critical decision. An outstanding client possesses a combination of characteristics that will significantly influence the outcome of any experience-based learning effort. Ideally, the client is both reputable and committed to the project outcomes. Reputable means that the client is an organization that is reasonably well-known across a broad spectrum of the population – and particularly well-known among the Generation Y segment. Reputable doesn't necessarily mean "cool" or attractive. For example, few members of Gen Y think of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) as a cool organization. And reputable doesn't necessarily mean that the client's objectives are in line with the students' own values and experiences. Not one student in the class working with the RIAA was eager to tackle the client's assignment – to develop and implement a campaign to convince their peers to stop illegally downloading music from the internet. Interestingly, every student in the class was an admitted illegal downloader. However, the students benefitted greatly from working with such a challenging client – because that is exactly the type of client that they will often be working for as they progress through their careers.

Reputable does mean that the client is a legitimate player in the industries and/or categories where they compete. In every semester that the *Projects in Marketing* course has been offered, we have worked with clients who are leaders in their respective fields, including government (CIA, ODNI, U.S. Navy), automotive (Chevrolet, Honda, Nissan), financial services (Citibank, American Century Investments, Goal Financial), entertainment (RIAA, professional sports team), transportation (APTA), and fashion retailing (American Eagle). Students' parents and peers are generally impressed to learn of the quality and reputation of the firms that they are directly working with, and this energizes and motivates the students to achieve at the highest possible level.

However, a reputable client who isn't committed to the project's outcomes will short-change the student (and the client) experience. Commitment to the project's outcomes means several things. It means designating an official point of contact within the client organization, who is prepared and authorized to review and approve student campaign proposals. It means that the client is willing to make the commitment of time and resources necessary to maximize the students' efforts. This means meeting as necessary with the students throughout the semester, providing timely responses to students' questions and requests for approval of proposed campaign tactics, and offering candid, constructive criticism of student deliverables. In short, it means managing this engagement the same way the organization would manage an engagement with any of its marketing agencies of record. Allocating a budget for the students to use in planning and implementing their strategies – even if it's a token amount – signals to the students that the client is committed to the project outcomes. Good clients are not those who have no marketing staff – and see a project course as a way to get some free consulting advice. Instead, good clients possess the resources required to plan, fund, supervise, and evaluate the students' efforts.

Commitment to the project's outcomes also means that the client is genuinely interested in, and willing to imple-

ment student ideas and recommendations. When the client perceives the student group to be a specialized extension of their own marketing department or advertising agency of record, commitment to the project's outcomes becomes an inevitable byproduct. Students appreciate and value this commitment – resulting in maximum motivation and effort. Several clients that do an outstanding job in this area include Honda, Nissan, and American Eagle. When Honda invites the top three schools participating in a program to present to their managers at their U.S. headquarters in Torrance, CA, their most senior executives (i.e., Executive Vice Presidents) are committed to attend and judge the campaigns of the participating schools. These Honda executives make it clear that they have a high regard for the insights gained as a result of working with the students. At the conclusion of Nissan's recent 2009 Cube Collegiate Challenge, the focal university and another school presented their campaigns to a group of roughly 100 upper level managers at Nissan's U.S. headquarters in Franklin, TN. It was evident to the students that Nissan genuinely valued their insights, and treated them as peers in soliciting their input. They asked the students for strategic advice, and even held a focus group with them after the presentations to gather additional input for use in future feature and styling decisions. At a recent presentation to American Eagle's senior executives at their Pittsburgh, PA headquarters, managers commented that they couldn't remember any instance when all of the firm's senior managers, including the CEO, were in the same room at the same time. This level of commitment to the project outcomes impresses the students, and results in high levels of motivation and commitment. In short, the right client is one who by virtue of their reputation and involvement energizes the student participants, who specifies challenging and measurable objectives related to real world market situations, and who values the opportunity to benefit from both student planning and implementation – where students are able to see the tangible results of their work and its effect on the client's objectives.

2. Class Format

The structure and format of the class is a key consideration. The obvious alternatives are to make the experience-based learning project a major assignment that is part of an existing business class (e.g., Integrated Marketing Communications, Brand Management, Marketing Strategy, Principles of Advertising, Public Relations Management), to assign the project to an appropriate student organization (e.g., Marketing Club, Advertising Club), or to design a class structure completely around the project itself. At this university, we have experience with each of these alternatives, and have come to strongly prefer and endorse the latter approach. The *Projects in Marketing* class is structured so that the class operates as a real-world marketing

agency – working for an actual client on an actual assignment.

Everything about the class structure is designed to maximize the positive effects of experience-based learning by replicating how the students would operate in an actual career setting. According to Wynd (1985), marketing "comes alive" when students are provided the opportunity to relate their textbook learning to the real world through such an experiential approach to marketing education. The class participants are asked to "apply" for the departmental assignment (e.g., Research, Campaign Strategy, Advertising, Public Relations) that they feel represents the best match with their skills and interests. Department Head assignments, as well as the assignment of the overall "Agency Coordinator" are made by the class instructor based on the interests, experience, and qualifications of the students. Grading is more subjective than in a regular course, and is designed to mirror performance evaluations in the corporate world. A combination of agency-level, department-level, and individual-level measures are used – with a key grading component being the student evaluations of each other's effort and contribution via formal, written performance appraisals (Chapman and van Auken, 2001). In addition, similar to some corporate performance evaluation systems, students are graded based on the output of both the overall class (agency) as well as the output of their individual departments (e.g., Research, Campaign Strategy, Advertising, Public Relations).

The project class approach has several advantages. It allows for students to be invited/selected to join the class, as opposed to the normal class registration process. This has resulted in very bright and highly motivated students taking the course. The high caliber of students helps create a commitment to excellence and an expectation of outstanding performance among the class participants. Wood (2003) finds that experiential education tools are judged to be more effective when they involve an element of ownership by the students. The "marketing agency" approach also permits close control over the size of the class. Based on the positive publicity the class has garnered over the past 4-5 years, it is not uncommon to have 40-50 interested applicants per semester. Unfortunately, a class of 40 students is practically unmanageable for the type of clients and projects we've tackled. It is difficult, if not impossible, to keep 40 students equally and dutifully employed in the project. A class size of between 20-25 students is optimal. By designing the entire class around the project, it is possible to control the class size to suit the client and the project. Designing the entire class around the project assignment also enhances the "special" nature of the class as well as the resulting learning experience. This is not a typical class. Typical testing and grading instruments do not apply. In fact, students often represent the class as an internship for credit with a world class company on their resumes – an indication that they view it as a special learning opportunity.

3. Recruiting the right students

With the optimal class size limited to 20-25 students, recruiting the right students can be a make or break consideration. Our experience teaches that the quality of the students in the class is a significant source of motivation and commitment for those involved. Good students want to be surrounded by other good students – not by "freeloaders" who expend little effort and still walk away with a good grade due to the efforts of a few dedicated team members. As such, a formal process for determining the class participants is an absolute necessity.

Students are informed about the class in a number of different ways. Announcements are made about the class during the *Principles of Marketing* course that all undergraduate marketing majors take as a prerequisite before selecting individual marketing electives to fill out their programs of study. Undergraduate Student Advisors are committed to promoting the class to their qualified advisees during discussions about course sequencing and particularly just prior to semester registration. Past competitive successes that the class has enjoyed are promoted to students via school publications – both electronic and print. Just prior to the registration period for the next upcoming semester, the class instructor visits other key elective classes to present an overview of the Projects in Marketing course and to stimulate interest in applying.

The formal application process requires that interested students complete a form that asks for (1) their overall grade point average, (2) their grade point average in their marketing coursework only, (3) a list of the marketing electives that they have completed along with the earned grades, (4) a list of the marketing electives they are taking in the current semester for which no final grades have been earned, and (5) their contact information. In many instances, the student will submit a current resume along with their application that provides additional information about relevant job and internship experiences – particularly when the student is not satisfied that their grade point average adequately represents their qualifications. When the class instructor is not familiar with the student applicant from a previous classroom or other university experience, an in-depth personal interview may be used to supplement the information provided by the student's application and resume. Along with input from Student Advising, the class instructor selects the most deserving 20-25 students from an applicant pool that typically ranges from 40-50 students. Through this formal process, the quality of the class participants is assured.

4. Filling leadership positions

Perhaps the most important and difficult decision that the instructor will make throughout the semester is with respect to filling the leadership positions in the student marketing agency. The *Projects in Marketing* class format typically involves establishing four key departments – Research, Campaign Strategy, Advertising, and Public Relations. Four department heads plus an overall agency coordinator must be identified and assigned. These five decisions are critical in determining eventual class performance. Unfortunately, traditional objective measures (e.g., GPA) don't always provide the necessary insights for making optimal leadership staffing decisions. An effective student leader must be a clear and effective communicator, adept at conflict resolution, an effective motivator, a good organizer, and possess both an even temperament as well as an outstanding work ethic – qualities that are difficult to observe and/or measure.

Projects in Marketing students are asked to indicate whether or not they are interested in a class leadership position, and if so, to provide a summary of their leadership qualifications along with supporting documentation and references. In some instances, the instructor's prior experiences with the student can be a vital input. In those instances where the instructor has no prior experience with the self-nominated student, the instructor must seek out and rely on input from other faculty, student advisors, and current/former students who are acquainted with the candidate. The chemistry of the overall class as well as each department depends on making optimal leadership choices.

5. Teaching the class

Chapman and van Auken (2001) find that instructors of project courses play a significant role in influencing how students perceive the educational benefits of this type of classroom experience. However, teaching a projects class can involve substantial differences from teaching a conventional (non-EBL) course. On the one hand, it is imperative that the work developed and presented to the client is the students' work, and not the instructor's. The richness of the experience for the students will not be realized if they are simply following the lead and direction of the class instructor, and merely implementing his/her ideas. On the other hand, it is the instructor's responsibility to make sure that the quality and content of the work is responsive to the client's objectives and reflects well on both the class and the university. As such, the instructor's role is more to guide and facilitate the agency's progress and performance – instead of "doing" the work for them. Given the talent and experience of many instructors who are candidates to teach projects courses, it can be difficult to develop and maintain this proper balance between facilitating and doing.

A critical responsibility is to optimally advise and manage the agency's leadership group (i.e., the department heads and agency coordinator). The agency leaders need to be empowered and managed – just as in a real world organizational context. While these class leaders need to encourage input from all members of the agency, each and every agency decision cannot be presented to the entire agency for input and approval. Choosing the right leaders and empowering them to act in support of the best interests of the

agency is critical. In some ways, the class instructor presents himself or herself as more of a valued resource to the agency – almost in the same way a board of directors operates as a valued resource to the operating executives in a public or private corporation. The board brings experience, expertise, and an outside perspective to the table, and ultimately approves or rejects the firm's plans, but doesn't actually formulate or implement them. Achieving the appropriate balance – where the instructor "steps back" and facilitates the process instead of imposing his/her preference and ideas on the resulting work – can have a pivotal influence on the student learning experience.

6. Measurement and evaluation

Students are prone to be fixated on grades – how they are determined and what they need to do to achieve them. Although this can be a positive influence on their individual performance in a conventional class, it is not as helpful in a project class. While acknowledging that the students deserve to clearly understand how they'll be evaluated at the end of the semester, the real focus must be on how the class as a whole will meet and exceed the client's objectives. In order to develop and maintain this focus, it's imperative to quantify the class objectives wherever possible. When the client's objectives are not adequately specified and quantified, the instructor – with the input from his/her leadership team – must supplement these objectives with a set of measurable, quantifiable goals. Depending on the nature of the project, measurable objectives for targets such as the number of advertising and/or public relations impressions and the percent change in awareness and/or purchase intention should be established. These specific objectives serve to focus the students' attention away from their individual performance, and towards the overall class accomplishments.

When possible and appropriate, the pre- and post-campaign research conducted by the agency should be positioned and identified as a critical component of each individual student's evaluation. In nearly all of our campaigns, pre-campaign surveys were fielded with a representative sample of the target audience. These surveys established pre-campaign benchmarks for important measures such as unaided and aided awareness, familiarity, attitudes and perceptions, and purchase intention for the client's product/service. Students clearly understand that their *individual* performance is dependent on how the *class* performs in increasing awareness, familiarity, attitudes, and purchase intention – as measured by a comprehensive post-campaign survey. The comparison between post-campaign and pre-campaign measures is acknowledged to be the driving force in measuring and evaluating class performance.

7. Implementation is key

As mentioned earlier, ideally a project course involves working with a client who provides students with the op-portunity to actually implement their plans and see the tangible results of their work. Implementation provides opportunities for a much richer learning experience in a number of different ways. Specifically, the implementation phase of a project course can provide opportunities for students to manage and allocate budgets, to administer and delegate responsibilities within the agency, and to orchestrate the interfunctional coordination of resources within and outside of the agency – activities that facilitate the development of teamwork and team building, communications and listening skills, and critical thinking and problem solving (Gremier et al., 2000).

Managing and allocating a real budget, no matter how limited, helps students to understand and experience budget and expense issues that are difficult to replicate in a conventional marketing classroom context. Spending must be allocated between departments in a way that maximizes the agency's ability to meet and exceed the client's objectives. Individual departments must propose and defend their requested budget allocations to the agency coordinator and the class instructor. Disbursements must be managed, tracked, and reconciled with the actual budget. Calculation of the return on the client's investment in the class must be reported and explained. Allocating and spending real money, on real expenditures, in support of real objectives, for a real client, provides a learning experience that helps prepare students to more successfully embark on their business careers.

Implementation also necessitates that the class develop an organizational structure and allocate responsibilities between and within departments. In contrast to a typical class project, a project class typically requires that scarce resources be allocated across many different tasks and priorities. The administration and delegation of responsibilities within and across departments provides numerous teachable moments that students would not confront without the requirement to actually implement their plans. In addition, the implementation phase of an effective project class helps to much more easily expose those individuals who are not pulling their weight in the class.

Finally, the implementation component of a project class forces students to work together as a cohesive team – both during and outside of the scheduled class meetings – a skill set prized by marketing practitioners (McCorkle et al., 1999). Drawing on the full resources of the class – as is required when a major campaign must be developed and implemented within the confines of a relatively short semester – forces a level of interfunctional coordination not otherwise necessary without any expectation of actually carrying out the student-developed plans. Moreover, the agency's success is dependent on capitalizing on all possible sources of expertise not only within, but also outside of the class, including university, corporate, and social resources available to the participating students. In many instances, expertise in areas such as web design, video production, graphic design, and media relations must be acquired outside of class. Significant positive learning out-

comes result when students are forced to identify and acquire such expertise in the process of implementing their campaign plans. In the real world, strategic marketing decisions involve substantial interaction with others (Razzouk et al., 2003).

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

In summary, our experience teaches that the optimal experience-based learning takes place when (1) a reputable client becomes a partner with the class, (2) the class is structured entirely around that client and their objectives, (3) the class recruits and attracts the very best and brightest students, (4) key student leaders are carefully identified and empowered to "own" the class, (5) the instructor acts as an experienced, objective facilitator/advisor, (6) the collective performance of the class supersedes individual student performance, and (7) the client provides students with the opportunity to actually implement their plans and see the tangible results of their work. Developing an experience-based learning approach that capitalizes on all or at least some of these factors should result in the most positive and rewarding learning experience.

A question that remains is to understand why the focal university's *Projects in Marketing* class has been so successful in winning the national competitions held by distinguished clients such as Honda, Goal Financial, and Nissan. Three of the above seven factors have played a particularly important role in this success. First, the fact that the class is structured entirely around the project is a key determinant. EdVenture Partners (EVP) estimates that roughly 75% of the universities that it works with on client-directed projects develop and implement a class structure that is entirely devoted to the project, while 25% of the schools use the project as an add-on to an existing class. However, EVP further estimates that 90% of the schools that are invited to participate as finalists in their national competitions, based on the quality of their campaigns, structure their classes entirely around the project. Not surprisingly, developing and implementing a class structure that focuses the students' attention completely on the clients and their objectives results in a level of ownership, motivation, commitment, and effort that results in superior work.

Second, the quality of the students participating in the class helps explain their success. This is not to suggest that the focal university has significantly better students on average than the other schools engaged in these competitions. Instead, the high standards set for gaining admittance into the class results in a cross-section of students who are uniformly smart, talented, and motivated. These admittance standards have created a reputation about the class, and a culture within the class, that will accept nothing less than outstanding performance. Students admitted to the class explicitly understand that they will be expected to make a commitment of time and effort that is well beyond most if not all of their other courses. They are the kind of students who relish such a challenge. This results in a level of dedication and teamwork that is much different from the typical team projects that they have worked on. These students, in part due to the legacy established by their predecessors, expect to be invited to participate in the national finals and expect to perform well.

Interestingly, the students admitted to the most recent *Projects in Marketing* class have an average cumulative grade point average of 3.6 out of 4.0 across all of their college coursework. Moreover, the Projects in Marketing class is positioned as a capstone course to be taken in the final one or two semesters of the participating students' college careers – attracting students who have significant knowledge and experience from multiple marketing electives and internships already under their belts. Similar to many schools, the focal university strongly encourages students to secure multiple internships during their college careers, and it's not unusual to find that the students in *Projects in Marketing* class already have significant real-world work experience that better equips them to perform at an outstanding level. Clearly, a key influence on performance is the high quality of student participants.

Finally, experience on the part of the class instructor in carefully adopting and carrying out the facilitator/advisor role is critical. As mentioned earlier, teaching a project class can be very different from teaching a conventional class. In many ways, it is more like managing than teaching. Class participants are more like employees than students. The focus is on deliverables rather than grades. The road map for the course is the client's objectives, not the course syllabus. Developing the knack for teaching this type of course comes from experience. Each semester brings with it a set of issues/challenges that the instructor must help the students face and successfully manage. Although each challenge will be idiosyncratic to the individual client involved, a seasoned instructor can see the common themes across multiple clients and be better prepared to guide (not direct) the students' efforts toward more effective responses and solutions.

At this major university, the same instructor teaches this course each semester, and has done so for twelve consecutive semesters. The benefits of consistency and focus seem to outweigh the downside of losing the fresh perspective that may accompany using a variety of different instructors. Remember, the fresh perspective in this class is expected to come from the students, not the instructor, because it's their class, their client, their campaign, their deliverables. The very best students, working in a class structure where they own the client and the project, working for a coach/mentor who demands and knows how to elicit outstanding performance, results in outcomes that greatly benefit all important stakeholders – the students, the clients, and the university.

CONCLUSION

Business schools are frequently criticized for focusing too much attention on theories and concepts, and not enough attention on communication, decision-making, and other skills necessary for career success (Lamb et al., 1995). Experiential learning is a philosophical orientation toward teaching and learning, which engages students with direct experiences and guided reflection (Frontczak, 1995). Active learning is consistently shown to result in better understanding through the application of theory to real-life situations (Hakeem, 2001). Effective execution of a project course fosters many useful managerial skills important to potential employers (Malhotra et al., 1989), making a difference in students' ability to transfer knowledge, skills, and attitudes from the confines of the classroom to their interactions in the broader world (Smith and Van Doren, 2004).

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