

# A PROJECT MANAGEMENT FOCUS: A WAY FOR ABSEL TO GROW

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to suggest a way for ABSEL to grow. It is this author's observation and opinion that ABSEL's major focus, business simulation design and execution, is not attracting an increasing number of members. This paper asks ABSEL members to consider trying to grow by attracting new groups of teachers and professors who teach experientially but do not focus on the kinds of games or exercises which have been ABSEL's traditional concentration. I believe that ABSEL should try to attract those who teach via the project, especially those that teach project management experientially. This paper focuses on project management, provides evidence that it can and is taught experientially, provides examples of courses in project management where an experiential pedagogy is used, and provides evidence that other business professional pedagogical organizations have yet to feature project management as one of their topics covered.*

## INTRODUCTION

ABSEL is a wonderful organization. It provides a relaxing, fun atmosphere for college instructors and professors to interact and trade perspectives on experiential learning and learning in general, and for simulation authors to learn from fellow authors about developing and operating business games. If ABSEL has a focus, and I believe it clearly does, it is on business simulation design and execution. ABSEL focuses on business simulations of multiple business disciplines, including but not limited to strategy, human resources, marketing and supply chain. Many of us ABSElers believe that simulations are an ideal way to teach business operations and strategies and to facilitate student awareness of the consequences of their abilities to make business related decisions. I've talked to non-simulation-user colleagues about simulations, and many say they respect simulations and would consider using them, but most never do. And as Tower (2011) points out few are willing to teach with simulations, and he offers reasons why. I believe the frequency of use of simulation in the college classroom is declining and I do not see that trend changing.

So what happens to ABSEL as our professional colleagues seems less attracted to our organization's major focus? Obviously, the future is uncertain. Although in contrast pessimism implied above, McGraw (McGraw Hill, 2015) hill reports that over 4500 users in over 600 colleges in more than 50 countries use their two major strategic business simulations users. Still ABSEL is not growing and I want to argue that ABSEL should explore trying to attract new groups of teachers and professors who teach experientially but do not focus on games or exercises that ABSEL has traditionally considered experiential. I want ABSEL to attract those who teach via the project, especially those that teach project management experientially.

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT COURSES

Project management (PM) programs and courses focus primarily on projects that in many cases, are prototypes of contained or limited focus endeavors that organizations use to enhance profitability or drive efficiency. University PM programs are not as popular in universities as Marketing or Accounting programs, but many schools offer PM programs and courses, some at the undergraduate level, some at the graduate level, and many schools offer seminars or certificates to practitioners. While project management pedagogy is relatively recent in business schools, it is not brand new. Many disciplines use project learning especially relatively new business disciplines, such as entrepreneurship, sustainability, non-profit organizations, and construction management. In addition there are programs in project management, itself, that according to websites focus on project management skills without specifying the reason for the project. Examples include non-specific programs at Loyola U. IL (2015) and Penn State U.(2015).

There seems to be a variety of types of classes where project management is the major focus. Some are aimed at a specific kind of project, for example a Marketing Research project or a project course that helps students learn Construction Management (The Universities at Shady Grove, 2015); while as mentioned above, others seem to be aimed projects in general (Loyola University Chicago, 2015, Project Management Institute 2015, Thomas Edison University, 2015). Project management in an entrepreneurship class would likely to focus on startups, and the projects I was most familiar with before writing this paper and kind that I ask students to undertake in my classes are research projects. In later paragraphs, I will try to describe the types of courses and programs available, and the degree to which courses are taught experientially. I will also describe in some detail two courses I am very familiar with that use a project management format.

It should be pointed out that there have been papers delivered at ABSEL conferences that cover project learning. I've reviewed the last five years of ABSEL proceedings and found three papers that have covered the topic. Reed et al (2012) described university sponsored microcredit projects (Yunus, 2007) in eleven communities where students worked with faculty and community members to set up self-help groups for the disadvantaged. While students participated, their efforts were not part of a course. Hornyak and Lawlor (2013) described a university effort to establish a project as a way of measuring Academic Learning Outcomes to meet Florida's Academic Learning Compacts. Finally, Kurthakoti and Finestone (2015) developed project based classes to teach Advertising, International Marketing, and Market Research. In each class, groups of students created plans to complete a self-directed project in their particular course, a plan to advertise a hypothetical product in the advertising class, a marketing plan accompanying a company locating in a new country in the International Market-

ing class, and a research plan accompanying the establishment of a new product or service in the Marketing Research class.

In its most ideal form, a project management class asks students to create an entity or an endeavor that has practical, instead of just educational, value. For example, a course in marketing where students create a marketing plan for a real company, or an entrepreneurship class where students create a plan for a startup and then try to raise money to implement their plans. These are truly experiential in that students can go through all four of Kolb's stages (Kolb, 1984): abstract conceptualization (planning and using theory) active experimentation (experimenting), concrete experience (implementing), and reflective observation, (reflecting and evaluating consequences). and in addition, create real world consequences. Of course a project management class can still have focus on projects, not have obvious practical consequences and still be valuable and experiential, just as a simulation is valuable and just as Kurthakoti and Finestone (2015) projects were valuable.

I know of two instances where a course asks students to apply what they know to a real situation. The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater features a launch pad experience (UWW, 2015/ Launch pad) in their entrepreneurship program. Students who sign up for this experience create a startup that venture capitalists can choose to invest in. DePaul University (DePaul, 2015) features a Resource Development course in which the final project consists of students doing research to help real non-profits create a plan for fund raising.

Some programs feature hands on projects that ask students to design and build projects but do not create the project for a real company. For example in Northern Arizona's construction management program (nau.edu, 2015), sophomores build a mock-up of a project according to plans and specifications, juniors create computer models, project plans and specifications, and cost analysis for a project and seniors manage all aspects of a project. On the Northern Arizona U. website (nau.edu, 2015), the senior project does not specify whether the project the student is managing is real world or hypothetical. Another example of students managing a project seemingly not real world setting was described above by Kurthakoti and Finestone (2015) and takes place in the Marketing Department of Arcadia University.

Most courses I've researched (on the internet) do not ask students to plan or undertake a project in the real world. Instead they seem teach skills and principles important for implementing a successful project without a real project to implement. This includes a course called Managing Projects in the Real World (Georgetown University, 2015) which appears on the website to feature instruction, but there appears to be no assignment to apply what is learned to a real or even a hypothetical situation. So on the surface, courses like the Georgetown's course do not look experiential, but one cannot tell without at least a detailed syllabus.

I teach sustainability to undergraduates as part of a Sustainability Management Certificate, and two of the courses of the certificate's curriculum contain projects. The first course is a Sustainability Management Course (Gosenpud, 2012) covering

multiple facets of the field. Partially because the sustainability field is not narrowly defined and partially because student interests are varied, course projects are not rigorously defined. Projects are expected to be hands on, and grades are lower if they are not. Examples of projects have included the establishment of a campus wide service (such as a water bottle refill station), a review campus wide campaign (e.g., to recycle), a survey of recycling habits among students, a feasibility study for establishing an organic restaurant, and a study estimating the carbon footprint of the Christmas holidays

The second is the capstone course of the certificate, a course which has yet to be offered. It is designed to be much more rigorous than the first class, requiring two lab science courses as prerequisites and the course itself will include units and assignments covering research methodology. Projects are expected to apply research methodologies, for example, a pre and post measurement design, or the use statistics to measure the validity of outcomes. This Sustainability Project Management Course is patterned after a similar class in UWW's Science-Business program (UWW/SciBus, 2015).

## OTHER PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Earlier, I stated that I want ABSEL to seek educators who teach using projects as potential conference participants. This seems to me to be a new field and it is at least possible that those who teach with projects might be attracted to milieu where project management educators can share their approaches and learn from each other. I've looked at the Academy of Management 2016 conference web site (Academy of Management, 2015), the Eastern Academy of Management Conference for both 2014 and 2015 the call for papers webpage for the Teaching Society for Management Educators (2015), and the sponsoring organization for the Journal of Management Education, and the neither of these organizations have project management tracks. So at least two of the higher end professional organizations that focus on teaching management do not explicitly attempt to attract project management educators.

## CONCLUSION

Project management is a relatively new way to teach. It is used in four of management education's newer disciplines, construction management, entrepreneurship, sustainability and not-for-profit organizations, and many universities have Project Management programs. Teaching using projects is experiential and other management education organizations (such as the Academy of Management) are not explicitly focusing on the project management pedagogy. It is appropriate for an experientially learning focused organization such as ABSEL to actively seek papers on teaching project management and doing so may help ABSEL grow. Just a thought.

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