

UTILIZING INSTITUTIONAL PROBLEMS AS AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an in-class project that combined the constructs of public relations theory with experiential learning that translated into a practical benefit to the institution. The project required an analysis of a major health issue relating to children, interpretation of that analysis by applying critical thinking skills, and an application of those learnings through the development of creative executions. The purpose of the project was to a) apply the theoretical concepts of a course in Public Relations; b) creation of logical justification for creative executions; c) improve student desk research, critical thinking analysis, communication of conceptual ideas, experience team based skills, and d) provide an opportunity for students to give back to the college community.

INTRODUCTION

Most institutions periodically have significant issues that require some degree of specific marketing expertise to resolve. Historically, institutions that are not of sufficient size to have the expertise in house look outside for assistance in solving these issues. Primary sources for this type of assistance could be agencies specializing in a specific field (e.g. Public Relations); or firms with a particular expertise (e.g. financial firms); or firms that can complete a specific project (e.g. Market Research firm to field and analyze survey data). This situation may offer students, who are enrolled in courses which cover that particular issue, an opportunity to have a learn-by-doing experiential learning experience.

An opportunity to engage students beyond the traditional learning environments goes beyond traditional case studies prepared by outside resources (Harvard Business Review, etc.). Today's students are looking for new ways to learn. Traditional lecture-based classes facilitate the process of passive learning (Munoz and Huser, 2008). Students spend their class time recording the content and are left little time to reflect, synthesize and apply the concepts discussed (Shakarian 1995). The traditional one-way lectures, rote memorization, and regurgitation of isolated facts and terms appear tedious and boring to many students, especially the stronger, more creative students. Experiential learning form of pedagogy moves students from passive learners to more active learners (Munoz and

Huser, 2008). The challenge for educators is to design learning environments and instruction so that students will be able to use what they learn in appropriate new contexts and be able to transfer the knowledge (Eyler, 2009).

ACTIVE LEARNING BASICS

Active learning (Bonwell and Eison, 1991) is anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing. These authors describe the general characteristics of active learning as follows:

- Students are involved in more than listening.
- Instruction emphasizes the development of students' skills more than just transmitting information.
- Students develop a higher order of thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).
- Students are engaged in practicing business activities (e.g. research, discussion, and writing).
- Students can explore their own attitudes and values (p.2).

Smart and Csapo (2007) indicate that, when used as part of a college course pedagogy, active learning provides clear opportunities for student interaction and involvement by using controlled instructional projects. These authors posit that the active learning experience provides a rich resource for learning that helps students understand and retain knowledge. Active learning is thought of as learning by doing (Wood, 2003). Historically, the term learning by doing describes the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Learning by doing involves active participation in a planned event, an analysis of and reflection on what is experienced, and the application of principles learned in the classroom and life situations (Smart and Csapo, 2007 p. 452).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND THE MARKETING DISCIPLINE

Experiential learning in a college course is the incorporation of active, participatory learning opportunities. Experiential learning is sometimes called situational learning. Experiential learning occurs whenever the student is moved from the role of a passive listener to that of active respondent. It creates opportunities for data learning, as

opposed to assumption learning because it requires students to engage first hand in a proactive manner, to express opinions, to use inductive reasoning, and work in teams (Hawtrey, 2007, pg. 143).

Based on Munoz and Huser (2008), one method to reduce passive learning in the marketing discipline is to use experiential learning in the classroom. These authors indicate there is significant marketing education literature indicating numerous activities, such as games, cases, computer simulation, service-learning projects, and role playing to support the utilization of these experiential techniques in college marketing courses. Educators have an opportunity to leverage the benefits of experiential learning and incorporate them into appropriate curriculum. The technique of experiential learning requires that students draw on their direct experiences to reflect, test, and create new ideas. Researchers have suggested that experiential learning is successful because it increases a student's level of involvement in the material, encourages higher order thinking, and leads to improved test performance. Experiential exercises used in the marketing curriculum have been found to increase the level of realism, learning involvement, and to foster an appreciation of marketing among nonmarketing majors. The use of a demanding, real-world marketing project (i.e. situation analysis) is also appropriate for a marketing course (Munoz and Huser, 2008, p.215). Increasingly, marketing educators are using experiential learning (Smart, Kelley and Conant, 1999).

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Caldwell College now offers three different graduate programs that focus on the advanced methods, principles, and procedures of basic and applied behavior analysis practice and research, and its application in complex environments (i.e., home, school, work, other community settings, and institutional settings). The core of each program consists of coursework that has been approved by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board as meeting the academic requirements to sit for the Board Certified Behavior Analyst TM (BCBA) exam. The College's graduate programs in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) were designed to prepare students for high-level employment within the fields where there are growing demands for competent professionals with expertise in applied behavior analysis: namely, developmental disabilities services, special education, and mental health. In addition, our College also offers a Post-Masters Certificate program which is intended for those who already hold a Master's degree and wish to take coursework in ABA required to sit for certification as a Board Certified Behavior Analyst TM (BCBA). The Master of Arts in ABA is intended for those individuals with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, General or Special Education, Speech Pathology, or a related field, who wish to pursue more advanced training in ABA. Caldwell College was the first to offer such a degree program in the state of New Jersey.

Behavior analysts are needed to work with individuals diagnosed with autism and can be employed in home, community, and public and private special education school settings, as independent educational specialists or clinicians, as staff trainers, or as directors of programs. Most behavior analysts initially earn a bachelor's degree in either psychology or special education. This is followed by extensive graduate education involving principles of learning and a demonstrated competence in designing, implementing, and evaluating treatment and educational interventions.

For many years it was mistakenly believed that autism was caused by emotionally cold parenting. We now know that the cause is most likely genetic in nature (although research continues to search for possible environmental triggers). Autism is a serious developmental disorder that affects a child's ability to communicate, form relationships with others, and to respond appropriately to his or her surroundings. The characteristics of autism typically appear before age 3. The disorder occurs approximately four times more often in boys than girls. Once believed to be extremely rare, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report that as many as 1 in 150 individuals in the USA may have the disorder.

More alarming, however, is that New Jersey has the highest incidence of autism for any state in the country, with about 1 of every 94 children being diagnosed. Although there is no evidence to suggest that New Jersey's high incidence rate for autism is due to any environmental cause, a number of other factors may be responsible. First, New Jersey leads the country in the frequency of educational assessments conducted for our children, thus promoting earlier and more accurate detection of autism. New Jersey is also home to some of the best autism awareness and advocacy organizations. Finally, some evidence suggests that many parents of children with autism are drawn to the Garden State to enroll their children in the highly regarded schools for autism, perhaps inflating the numbers. Whatever the causes for the increase in autism, studies have shown that the earlier autism is detected and treatment is begun, the better the overall outlook for the individual. At the present time, there are long waiting lists for Applied Behavior Analyst's services and a shortage of qualified treatment personnel in New Jersey. As such, there are many employment opportunities for behavior analysts in New Jersey and in adjoining states.

To further respond to this need, our newest program, the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in ABA, is set to launch in fall 2010 (pending state approval). This program will provide higher level training in designing, implementing, and carrying out ABA programs. This program will be one of only a few doctoral programs specializing in training professionals to deal with children with autism spectrum disorders. It is estimated that less than 25 such programs exist worldwide to train ABA specialists.

In order to have a facility that will allow the doctoral candidates a way to observe and learn from professionals

trained in evaluating and providing help to children affected by autism the College has plans to open an on-campus autism clinic. The autism clinic will be a venue for a variety of innovative and state-of-the-art educational and clinical services for individuals with autism spectrum disorders and plans on opening its doors in the fall of 2010. This center is among only five currently on educational campuses throughout the entire US. Our autism clinic will be specifically established to serve the families and children of North Jersey affected by autism spectrum disorders. The autism clinic is needed because New Jersey has the highest prevalence of these disorders. The clinic will also provide excellent training to ABA students. It will also help to meet the needs of families in New Jersey by making sure that the most effective treatments are available for them. However, given how the current economic downturn is affecting higher education, funds are not available in the institution's budget to provide construction costs for the clinic nor for marketing spending needed to establish awareness and usage of the autism clinic. The College is in the process of searching for funding opportunities to help fund the construction of the autism clinic on the College's campus. Part of that process was to interview a number of local marketing and public relations (PR) firms to gain insight into costs associated to hire professional services to raise funds for the project.

THE IDENTIFIED PROBLEM

It became clear to the Psychology Department that the cost to develop ideas to establish awareness, interest, and funding for the autism clinic would be significant. In light of the current economic situation affecting institutions of higher education, the Psychology Department wished to have an alternate way to avoid the \$30-50,000 fee the local marketing/pr firms quoted to complete the project. A coordinator of the Applied Behavioral Program was identified to be responsible for developing the curriculum, gaining approval of the degrees from the New Jersey Council of University and College Presidents, and creation and management of the clinic. This coordinator role was filled by a senior member of the Psychology Department who accepted responsibility as the point person for all of these activities. The more urgent need for the coordinator was to gain funding for the clinic. Although a state grant was obtained for the academic ABA programs, the funding for the construction of the clinic was not covered. The College could not divert operating funds to spend against the construction due to the uncertain economic climate and how that would impact tuition revenue as that is the only source of funds.

THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS

In the fall 2009 semester, an undergraduate course in Public Relations was offered on campus. The students

enrolled are from various majors (e.g. English, marketing, communication arts, etc.) and educational experience (mostly Juniors and Seniors). Several experiential learning projects were already part of the PR course syllabus. For instance, a complete Public Relation Campaign Plan and Press Kit must be developed by students using any existing consumer product (e.g. Nike sneakers, Gillette Fusion razors, etc.). Students must also create questions for a TV interview and be interviewed in the College's TV studio including lights, cameras and recording of the event. Part of one exam provides the students with a simulation based on a current crisis situation for a company (e.g. Johnson & Johnson's Baby Shampoo is allegedly reported to contain some ingredients tied to causing cancer). The students are given only thirty minutes to create at least 10 hypothetical questions and answers that the CEO might get at a news conference and they must develop a compelling press release responding to the crisis.

In response to a request from the College's ABA coordinator in the Psychology Department, the students in this PR class were asked to help develop ideas in a number of areas for the ABA program.

OWNERSHIP VERSUS EXPLOITATION

It is imperative that student buy-in for this type of project that benefits the institution be obtained before the project begins. This allows the students to have a sense of ownership rather than dealing with the project as an assignment or having a sense of being exploited by the Professor for the benefit of the institution. In this case, because of the social cause subject matter of the project, there was unanimous buy-in from the class to participate. It is also important to provide an incentive to the students so that there is some personal benefit to each student for participating in the project. In this case, the grade on the project presentation replaced students from taking one of the three exams for the course. This gave the students a high level of motivation to perform well on the project.

THE PROCESS

The PR class was broken down into four teams. Each team was assigned the task to develop Public Relations ideas for the autism clinic. To simulate a real world environment, the coordinator of the ABA program acted as the point person for students to contact with their questions and represented the role of the client for this learning exercise. First, one complete class was devoted to the coordinator presenting the problem to the PR class, providing a briefing on the problem with further details and answered questions from students. Next, students were given three weeks to research the problem by becoming familiar with the issue of autism, what the world of autism was made up of and to work in teams to develop creative PR solutions for this client. The students also had to develop material that reflected mock executions of their ideas and

PowerPoint slides on each idea they presented to this group. Again, the intent was to simulate a PR firm's actual oral presentation or "pitch" to a client along with explanatory information and examples of how to execute ideas known as concept boards. The student teams were required to dress professionally for an oral presentation. The culmination of the project required each team to present to a select group of the college community who portrayed the role of the client's marketing team.

THE ROLES FOR THE PROJECT

The professor responsible for the course acted in a number of capacities. First, as a project coordinator to make sure a timetable was executable within the course requirements and syllabus. The professor also provided organization to the problem by acting as the translator to take the ABA coordinator's needs and place them in a project framework that the students could comprehend and work within. The professor also acted as the facilitator during the presentations to direct students on and off the presentation section of the classroom. The professor took notes to accommodate a grade for each of the presentations and incorporated comments, notes, and grading suggestions from the client's marketing team.

The students were required to treat the project as part of a learning exercise to apply theories presented within the course content. The students operated in self-managed teams for this project. Each team self-selected a team leader to coordinate the team's activities. Each student was given specific responsibilities for the project. Among the roles required were: team leader; research analyst who conducted the desk research on the subject matter and costs for PR creative executions; students who developed the actual creative executions of the team's ideas; and PowerPoint coordinator to bring all of the elements together for the presentation.

The client acted as the point person for the students. Many students were so enthusiastic about this project that they held numerous "what if" and follow-up discussions with the client (ABA coordinator). The client's role also included a detailed briefing for the students of the situation. The client also provided specific comments/ reactions to each team's presentation and completed a wrap-up at the end of the presentation session.

The client marketing team represented the institution's departments that were involved with various aspects of this project. For this exercise, the client's marketing team included: the President of the College, two Vice Presidents, the Chair of the Psychology Department and the Associate Dean of the Business Division, and several faculty members from Psychology and Business. The client team provided direct feedback after each team presentation. The client team also provided written feedback to the Professor on each team's PR creative ideas, PowerPoint presentation and overall professionalism during the presentation.

THE PROJECT

The students were charged with developing PR solutions to three separate parts to the problem:

- 1) How to publicize the 5K run for autism fund raiser in spring 2010 at the College
- 2) How to publicize the opening of the Center in the fall of 2010
- 3) How to raise \$350K to fund the construction of the Center.

RESULTS

On a tactical level, the students performed very well. The four teams presented their ideas to the College's President, ABA coordinator and senior administrators (including the person in charge of PR for the College) in a professional manner. The presentations and the examples of the executions of the student ideas were well developed. All of the teams fulfilled expectations by presenting some of the basic PR tools. Several press releases were developed as well as several pitch letters to the media. These solutions conceptualized strong fund raising ideas, such as having a pasta dinner for all runners the night before the 5K run fund raiser as part of their presentation. One team presented an entirely new logo for the autism clinic that was not developed by any autism interest group or association. Many new ideas to raise money for the autism clinic were developed and presented. The most notable was the idea to decorate the walls of the autism clinic with puzzle pieces (the national symbol for autism support) that can be sold to sponsors with their names on each piece instead of the usual engraved stone pavers for the entrance to the autism clinic. The other idea was to have local businesses sell and display autism puzzle pieces with names of local residents on them.

Possibly more important, was the debrief comments from the students. Students commented that they had a clearer understanding of the concept of cause marketing because they actually had to develop ideas for the College's autism program. Virtually every student felt a new emotional tie to the tragedy of children with autism. Perhaps the most satisfying result was the unanimous response by students that they felt a strong emotional sense of social responsibility because they felt they had given something back to the College.

CONCLUSIONS

The overwhelming response from the people who role played the client's marketing team was that the entire process was very productive and all of the presentations were exceptionally professional. They also admitted that the students had done their homework and knew a great deal not only about the issue but also about what was going on at the College. The most significant result was the comment

from the ABA coordinator that many of the student ideas had not been thought of yet, despite the fact that the College had several marketing/ PR firms come to pitch for the opportunity to develop marketing/ PR programs to support the launch of the autism clinic.

Overall the results from this experiential exercise were exceptional on several different levels for the students. The subject matter of the exercise made a clear differentiation for students to move from taking this exercise as an assignment towards having a real sense of accomplishing a positive activity. The team's PR executions were tangible examples of the practical application of PR theory. The ability of the students to experience what it is like to present to high levels within the College was also a definite plus. The most important learning was the ability of the students to feel a level of social responsibility about autism and the deep sense of giving back to the College.

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