

DESIGNING BUSINESS CASE WRITING AS AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The use of experiential learning approaches such as capstone seminars, simulations, case competitions, internships, service learning, and collaborative projects are all practices that are desirable and well documented in the teaching of business courses. Despite research that shows that business case writing can provide students with experiential learning that fosters the understanding of business challenges, ethical situations, and real-world decision-making processes, this pedagogical tool has gained little attention in the experiential learning curriculum (Vega, 2010). To demonstrate the effectiveness of business case writing as an experiential learning tool, we discuss the case writing experience and the learning outcomes for two undergraduate business students who participated in a summer case project at the David Berg Center of Ethics. This paper provides a model for integrating business case writing assignments into business experiential learning courses.

BACKGROUND

Students learn about course principles and theories in the classroom, but often, they find it challenging to grasp these theories and to apply them in real-world business situations (Marriot, Tan, & Marriott, 2015). In an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, many business faculty members now use various forms of experiential learning in teaching business courses. Although not commonly used, business case writing is a powerful experiential learning pedagogical tool. Business case writing provides students with the critical skills required to connect business theories to concrete experience in ways that lead to a more profound understanding of business situations (Vega, 2010).

The Kolb (2015) experiential learning conceptual framework proposes a learning model that connects student learning to experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Kolb's experiential learning model shows that student learning can occur through both abstract education and practical experience. Similarly, Kolb and Kolb (2017) claim that experiential learning pedagogy provides opportunities for students to participate in high-impact learning activities that enrich their learning experience. Additionally, Robin and Karen (2010) observe that experiential learning instructional method helps students to use theoretical knowledge gained during coursework in real-life experiences.

Jones and Woodruff (2005) state that the use of case study writing as experiential learning activity helps students to retain and apply content. While the benefits of case teaching, as an experiential learning method is well known, only a few studies have examined the use of business case writing as an experiential learning pedagogical tool (Weller & Saam, 2019; Vega, 2017). Hence,

the purpose of this paper is to describe the learning experience and outcome for a 50 hours summer experiential learning case-writing project designed for undergraduate students. We draw on the students' feedback, reflections, and learning experience to discuss the effectiveness of case writing as an experiential learning tool that can facilitate valuable learning experiences for undergraduate students in all business disciplines.

THE BUSINESS CASE-WRITING PROJECT

We applied the four aspects of Kolb's experiential model in developing a 50 hours case-writing project for undergraduate business students at the University of Pittsburgh Certificate Program for leadership and Ethics (CPLE). The case-writing project combined elements of analytical research, writing, and reflection to give students a case writing project that applies business theory and practice. The project gave the students an opportunity to study an entrepreneurial leader in their business field and to experience first-hand the competing pressures leaders encounter in making business decisions.

The 50-hour case-writing project is included in the CPLE program at the University of Pittsburgh. Launched in 2004, the CPLE is a unique 16-credit certificate program focused on teaching undergraduate business students the integration of leadership and ethics. The CPLE program focuses on teaching five key competencies via experiential learning: ethical awareness and decision-making, rational leadership, high impact communication, project team management, and civic/social engagement. The program is based on a cohort model of 20-30 students participating from the start of their sophomore year through senior year.

In addition to course work, the CPLE program provides students with internship and project-based experiences during the summer. These out of the classroom experiences strive to provide real-world project skills to students, including experience with business research, communication, writing, and other technical and transferrable skills. The case writing project emerged as a way to engage CPLE students with real-world business dilemmas by introducing them to the form of case writing and research. In the summer of 2018, the Berg Center provided its first opportunity for undergraduates to work on a 50-hour case-writing project. Five students were selected to develop draft cases on local businesses in the Pittsburgh area that had socially responsible business mission statements. These students worked closely with Berg Center staff and the College of Business Administration faculty to undertake the research and initial drafts of business cases. Students were able to learn relevant research and writing skills while also learning about ethical organizations and business leaders. Students worked for 50 hours over the summer and received a stipend to support their efforts. The stipend was important for business students to allow them to participate in research experience will still receiving financial support.

In 2019, two students were selected to continue to participate in the case-writing project to help develop two of the 2018 cases for publication. The undergraduate students worked closely with the Berg Center's post-doctoral fellow to develop the cases by completing additional research and refining the quality of case writing. The students worked on two cases, including (1) a case for a business that provided low-interest loans to residents and (2) a case involving a sustainable initiative for a food service business. Students completed their 50-hour case-writing project during the summer of 2019, and received a stipend of \$1,000.

The case writing project included three components; (1) developing the theory and research (2) the case writing experience (3) reflection activity. The students worked closely with a case mentor to complete each phase of the project. In the first phase of the case-writing project, the students research and gather information about the entrepreneur, their business operation, leadership behavior, and decision-making process. The second phase of the project involved writing the case using the research information to frame (1) the hook (2) industry overview (3) company background (4) the entrepreneur story (5) the problem (6) historical context (7) commentary (Vega 2010).

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