Guided Student Engagement Through Research and Consultancy: Structure, Evaluation and Prognosis

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Abstract

This paper assesses the level of enhanced student engagement that was achieved in an Integrated Marketing Communications undergraduate course through a newly designed research and consultancy project. Theoretical underpinnings from the 1968 Critical Pedagogy Thesis are discussed along with the course setting, implementation process of the project, Moodle platform integration, and ways of enhancing project value beyond the classroom. In addition, course structure, outcomes evaluation, and directions for future projects are discussed.

Key Words: Student Engagement, Student Research, Student Consultancy, Case Studies, Marketing Education, Online Learning

This case study is based on a class project with roots in the 1968 Critical Pedagogy thesis of Freire (Freire, 2006), which calls for the liberation of students from oppression and recognizes their role in the creation of new knowledge. The project represented an implementation of the Social Constructivist Perspective (SCP) via reciprocity, collaboration, and reflection (Palincsar, 1998). It also encompasses Service Learning, which is defined as experiential learning that speaks to human and community needs through a structure created to enhance learning and development through reciprocity and reflection (Byars, 2007, Jacoby et al., 1996, Service-Learning Handbook, 2008). An essential aspect of the project relates to recent mandates of the accreditation bodies requiring evidence of community impact of all institutional goals in higher education involving teaching, research, and service (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2013 and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2012). The objective of the project also include enhancement of independent exploration by students of the core concepts of the Integrated Marketing Communications undergraduate course, providing of research and consultancy inputs to a client, and impacting business processes and outcomes of the client.

1. Course Setting

The project was set in an upper-level, hybrid Marketing course in the College of Business (COB), comprising senior Marketing, Management, and Communication majors. The course overview includes four major project goals: 1) provide students with a basic understanding of the nature of an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) Plan and processes used to implement the plan; 2) provide an interface between College of Business students and local for-profit businesses and not-for-profit institutions through a service learning experience; 3) provide the student with an opportunity to study current practices of local for-profit businesses

and not-for-profit institutions; and 4) to provide students an opportunity to help such local organizations by creating an integrated marketing communications plan.

As part of the course requirements, the class was asked to conduct library research and develop creative materials for integrated marketing communications plan for the Executive MBA program (EMBA) offered at the Northwest Houston Campus of Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU). The project was described in detail in the course syllabus and it accounted for 30% of the course grade. Students completed the project under the close supervision of a professor serving as their direct faculty advisor.

2. Implementation

The client or "community partner" visited the class and provided students a comprehensive brief along with samples of promotional materials. The expectations and deliverables were established via a project document template created by the professor, which was mutually agreed between the client and the students. The project was partially funded by a mini-grant from the PVAMU. The students were randomly assigned to one of the three teams and each team worked independently for 14 weeks to develop and execute the project.

2.1 Moodle Interface

To facilitate team functioning, the various functions of the Moodle 2.4.7 system (Moodle Pty 2014) were utilized. Moodle describes itself as "… a learning platform designed to provide educators, administrators and learners with a single robust, secure and integrated system to create personalized learning environments" (moodle.org/). The system is used campus-wide in PVAMU (Prairie View A&M University, 2014) to create a parallel online offering for every course offered. Relevant content, including project description, instructions, and samples of past cohort's projects were posted under Moodle Resources. Selection of scholarly journal articles for research was restricted to the online Proquest ABI Inform Index database, accessed through the Coleman Library web site link on Moodle (ProQuest LLC, 2014). Training was provided to the student teams by the professor along with support from the Library Liaison to COB in a computer laboratory. The ProQuest Boolean Search functions were utilized as filters, with selected key words from the Consumer Behavior and Higher Education domains serving as primary filters. In order to ensure that the research was current and relevant, the date range was limited to the previous five years. Each selection was validated and approved by the Library Liaison. Each student submitted a results list from Proquest ABI Inform Index database showing key search terms to support validation, accompanied by evidence of reading and noting by highlighted key points in a unique article.

A devoted discussion forum or Research Sandbox was set up for each team, as the prime communication tool to facilitate collaboration. However, the discussion forum was treated more as a developmental area and not used for grading purposes. The iMail function on Moodle was used as a backup communication tool for the project. A self-check for originality was conducted by each student via the Turnitin system integrated into Moodle, and a "clean" report formed the grading item. Training in the use of Moodle and Turnitin was provided by the professor, with

support from the PVAMU Distance Learning IT specialist serving as Liaison to the COB along with a senior student that had previously passed the course. APA style and formatting was completed with a review by the COB Center for Business Communication. Assignment Drop Boxes were created for submission of all digital materials pertaining to each stage of the project. Written feedback at each stage was provided via Moodle, along with a hard copy backup. Peer evaluations were elicited from each student, to ensure fair grading within the team. Finally, grades and comments were communicated via the Moodle Grade Book.

2.2 Project Development

Following the step-by-step procedure prescribed by Clow and Baack (2010), each team independently conducted primary and secondary research and submitted an outline of a creative brief (Sample 1), and means-ends chain, a theoretical framework, types of marketing appeals to be utilized, a message strategy and executional framework (Sample 2). A concept advertisement was also created. These tasks were completed by Week 7 of the semester and written feedback from the client as well as from the professor was provided to each team. Further, based on these materials, teams proceeded to develop and dovetail the concept advertisement into a range of creative material for traditional and non-traditional media, sales promotion, media release, sponsorship, and networking (Sample 3). In addition, each student submitted a statement of reflections on how the project helped achieve institutional, professional, and personal goals (Sample 4). Hard output comprised a team binder of all components of the project, along with a disk that included audio/audio-visual creative material. In Week 14, papers and presentations were evaluated by internal as well as external judges. External judges drawn from industry, faculty members, administrative personnel, and staff evaluated each team in terms of attainment of project goals. Students submitted their reflections addressing the achievement of institutional, course, and individual goals. Finally, the client provided feedback on the extent to which their needs were met.

3. Beyond The Classroom

Participating students were encouraged to include the completed project in their professional portfolio as part of their mentoring and professional development. In addition, students were asked to enhance their resume by incorporating the project citation in the resume and by highlighting the involvement of the student in the project in job interviews. A large number of students reported being distinguished by the project during recruitment and several students achieved successful placements mainly due to this differentiation.

The project was taken to the next level, as proposed in the mini-grant. It was presented to the faculty under the COB Brown Bag Research and Teaching Seminar program, supported by Campus Announcements. In addition, it was presented at the First PVAMU Fall Service Learning Showcase 2013 as well as at the PVAMU Annual Research Symposium. Additionally, the project was shared with PVAMU's Department of Multicultural Affairs (G-Force) and the COB administration for use as a recruitment tool. Moreover, it was cited in a faculty workshop at an international academic conference in business. Finally, the project was communicated to media, as well as *Campus* to Community Coalition of *Texas, and networking organizations* to spread the mantra of client-based projects in an academic environment.

4. Project Outcomes

The project outcomes were assessed by soliciting feedback from the participating students and judges and also from other audiences. The project seems to have increased greater faculty engagement with students resulting in enhanced student engagement and learning. The project also appears to have promoted student development, increased the level of student's critical skills, knowledge, and attitude, and developed awareness, accountability, focus, and compliance among students. However, the most important outcome of the project was the improved employability of the students that lacked high academic achievement (needed for co-ops and internship programs) since employers consider research experience as an equivalent for relevant professional experience. We find that there was also an increased sense of civic responsibility among students. As for clients, the project has produced a number of tangible benefits including ready and usable research and promotional inputs and improved business processes and outcomes. Several institutional outcomes were realized such as the fulfillment of course, COB, and PVAMU goals and generation of data for research in Service Learning, providing artifacts to establish excellence in research and learning to show to accreditation bodies such as Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). In addition, institutional reputation has increased, student recruitment is energized, enrollment has increased, and attrition rates have gone down. The project has also creased fundraising potential. Overall, the project helped provide outreach and promotion for PVAMU, COB, associated schools and departments, and created a sense of personal involvement among the important PVAMU stakeholders.

5. Limitations and Directions for Future Projects

We feel that there is a need to ensure greater support and involvement from the top administration of the University. Such support would motivate faculty members and students by creating intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards for them. We also feel that a concerted effort is needed to enlist greater participation of clients and local community. It will be helpful to have a more diverse panel of judges for the evaluation of the project requirements and outcomes. Systematic documentation of the project goals and processes and wider dissemination of the project outcomes along with programmatic impact evaluation is also needed. While we made great strides in introducing client-based projects within a classroom setting, much effort is still needed for enhancing 360-degree impact of the project.

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Sample 1
Advertising Design--Creative Brief

Our product/offering is the Executive MBA program at the Prairie View A&M University Northwest campus. The program includes a two year, 12 course workload enhanced by interactive, discussion-style curriculum and a trip to China to study Chinese businesses.

Our objective is to increase awareness of the Executive MBA program at Northwest Prairie View A&M University Campus.

Our target audience is the thirty (30) to forty-five (45) year old individuals with three (3) to five (5) years of leadership experience. These individuals usually already have full-time careers and families.

Our message theme for the EMBA Program is geared toward gaining an Executive MBA degree at an affordable cost, a structured 36 credit-hour program, AACSB accreditation, and international field trip.

Our support points are:

    a. The EMBA program is among best programs due to accreditation by the AACSB International.

    b. Included in tuition is the expenses of a trip to China to visit Chinese businesses

    c. Program for individuals aspiring to be a chief officer or high level manager.

    d. Includes Capstone Project which will give an opportunity for the student to participate in a real world project.

    e. Includes Executive MBA courses such as:

        i. EMCO 5203: Executive Managerial Communication

        ii. EMGM 5103: Data Analysis for Managerial Decision Making

        iii. EMGM 5113: Executive Leadership

        iv. EMGM 5303: Executive Topics in Strategy and Policy

    f. Highly prestigious and experienced instructors for coursework.

    g. Very Competitive Program

Our constraints are the Prairie View A&M seal, the NW campus phone number, physical address, fax number, web address, Prairie View purple and gold colors, PV College of Business logo, and AACSB logo.

Sample 2
Advertising Design
Means Ends Conceptualization of Components for Advertising Strategy

	ATTRIBUTE	BENEFITS	PERSONAL VALUES TAPPED
1.	AACSB Accredited Program	Top-notch information and learning	Wisdom, Accomplishment, Self-fulfillment, Improvement, Competence, Knowledge
2.	Interactive, discussion-style learning environment	Application of material, No boring lectures	Practicality, Communication, Competence, Democracy, Freedom, Personal Growth
3.	Majority of the program is delivered online	Flexible class time	Freedom, Self-Discipline
4.	Professional environment	Gives real life **chief officer** experience	Competence, Knowledge
5.	Field trip to China to study Chinese businesses	International experience	Diversity, Knowledge, Merit
6.	Cost	Less expensive than other EMBA programs plus financial assistance is available	Efficiency, Investing, Practicality, Reasonableness,
7.	Structured Program	Short 8 week, steady-paced classes,	Organization, Control
8.	Prestigious and Experienced Instructors	Quality education with professors who have experience in high level positions	Credibility, Competence, Brilliance, Abundance, Expertise

Strategy, Appeal, and Leverage Point:

Our message strategy is "You will become equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in the workplace."
Our appeal is rationality.
Our executional framework is a combination of slice-of-life and informative. The concept ad portrays everyday people and provides information to persuade prospective students to buy into the product.
Our leverage point is the catchphrase "Transforming into Excellence".

43

Sample 3
Print Advertisement- Copy Sheet
Size: 30 cm X 5 columns Color: B&W or 4-color Headline: Transforming into Excellence Sub-heading: ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE LOOKING TO TRANFORM THEIR CAREERS Body Copy: We are welcoming you to transforming into excellence with the experts. Our professors are seasoned professionals in their fields and they offer you real world experiences. Their experience range from corporate America to in-the-field experience. Our program is AACSB accredited and it has the potential to meet the needs of today's businesspeople. We are now offering scholarships. Don't wait! Apply today! Constraints: PV logo 9449, Grant Rd Houston, Texas 77070 Phone: 936-261-3311 www.pvamu.edu/emba

Sample 4		
Student Reflections		
Achievement of Course Learning Goals		
No.	Item	Alignment with Academic Program
1	Demonstrate an understanding of the IMC foundation	Goal 1: Mastery of Content	YES
2	Demonstrate an understanding of IMC advertising tools	Goal 1: Mastery of Content	YES
3	Demonstrate an understanding of the IMC promotional tools	Goal 1: Mastery of Content	YES
4	Demonstrate an understanding of the IMC integration tools	Goal 1: Mastery of Content	YES
5	Be able to create and present a team-based IMC plan verbally as well as in writing	Goal 1: Mastery of Content; Goal 5: Communications	YES
6	Be exposed to various perspectives of the new business environment: ethical, social, political,	Goal 1: Mastery of Content	YES

legal, economic, global, and environmental.		

Narrative: Upon completion of this project, I have acquired skills and capabilities that I believe will serve me great *purpose* as I continue my academic career. This project has enabled me to be *full of charisma and discipline myself* to work effectively in a team. The experience I have gained by working in this group will help me as I further my education because it has taught me to communicate effectively. I enjoyed working with my team members because each of them demonstrated qualities that became assets for the team and that it made it enjoyable to complete this project. I have grown both as a student and an individual because of this project. It has showed me that I can be creative in a team setting and still be open-minded about different ideas and opinions. I will leave Prairie View A&M University well-prepared and capable to compete with other college graduates because this and other courses have developed me into a *great intellectual*. I am grateful to my team for completing a high quality project and to the course instructor for helping mold me into a more productive student and person.