Dissecting Client-Based Projects in an Academic Setting: Modalities, Outcomes, and Prospects

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This paper examines the elements of undertaking client-based projects within a course.Theoretical moorings in from the 1968 Critical Pedagogy Thesis (Paulo, 2006) are discussed, along with course setting, implementation, Moodle platform integration, and enhancing the project value beyond the classroom. Further, pedagogical perspectives are presented, along with issues faced, and directions for future projects.

Key Words: *Case studies, marketing education, online learning, service learning*

Track: *Marketing Education*

1. Introduction

This case study is based on a project with roots in the 1968 Critical Pedagogy thesis of (Paulo, 2006), which calls for the liberation of students from oppression, and recognizes their role in the creation of knowledge. Moreover, the project represented an implementation of the Social Constructivist Perspective (SCP) (e.g. Palincsar, 1998) via reciprocity, collaboration, and reflection. Further, the project encompassed 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 &Associates, 1996, Service-Learning Handbook, 2008).An essential aspect of the project relates to recent mandates of accreditation bodies, for evidence of the community impact of all institutional goals-teaching, research, and service- in higher education (e.g., Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2012, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2012). Project objectives included an enhancement of independent exploration of the core concepts of the integrated marketing communications, providing research and consultancy inputs to a client, and impacting business processes and outcomes of the client.

2. Course Setting

The project was set in an upper-level hybrid marketing class in the College of Business (COB), comprising senior Marketing, Management and Communication majors. The course overview included the following goals:

"1. To provide the student with a basic understanding of the nature of an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) Plan and the process organizations use to implement the plan. 2. To provide an interface between students of the College of Business, and local community businesses and not-for-profit organizations, through a service learning experience. 3. To provide the student with an opportunity to study current practices of existing local businesses and not-for-profit organizations. 4. To allow students an opportunity to serve such local organizations by creating an integrated marketing communications plan.*"*

The class was invited to conduct research, and to develop creative material for integrated marketing communications plan the Executive MBA program offered at the Northwest Houston Campus of Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU).The project was listed in the syllabus, accounting for about 30% of the course grade. The project was completed on a volunteer basis, by students under close supervision of a professor serving as faculty advisor, and formed part of the course grade.

3. Implementation

The client or "community partner" visited with the class, and provided a comprehensive brief, along with samples of promotional materials for the EMBA program. Expectations and deliverables were established via a project document template created by the professor, which was mutually agreed upon by the client and students. Part of the project was funded by a University mini-grant. Studentsassigned into three teams worked independently for 14 weeks to develop the project.

Moodle Interface

To facilitate team functioning, various functions of theMoodle 2.4.7system 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/). This 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 LLC ABI Inform Index database, accessed through the Coleman Library web site link on Moodle (search.proquest.com. ezproxy.pvamu.edu/). Training was provided 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 Liaison. Every 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 toolto facilitate collaboration; however, this 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 a 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.

Project Development

Following the step-by-step procedure prescribed by Clow and Baack (2010), each team independently conducted secondary as well as primary research, and outlined a creative brief (Sample 1), and means-ends chain, a theoretical framework, types of appeals to be utilized, a message strategy and executional framework(Sample 2). A concept advertisement was also created. This work was completed by Week 7 of classes, and written feedback from the client as well as professor was provided to students. Further, based on the above, teams proceeded to develop and dovetail the concept advertisement into a range of creative material for traditional and non-traditional media (Sample 3); sales promotion, media release, sponsorship, and networking. 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 as well. In Week 14, papers and presentations were evaluated by internal as well as external judges. External judges from among industry, faculty, administration, and staff additionally evaluated the attainment of goals. Students submitted reflections, speaking to the achievement of institutional, course, and individual goals. Finally, the client provided feedback on the degree to which needs were met.

Sample 1 *Advertising Design- Creative Brief*

Our product/offering is the Executive MBA program at the Prairie View A&M University Northwest campus. This program includes a two year, 12 course workload packed with interactive, discussion-style curriculum and a trip to China to explore 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 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 Executive MBA degree, 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 AACSB International accredited.
        b. Included in tuition is 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	BENEFIT/S	PERSONAL VALUE/S
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 program online	Flexible class time	Freedom, Self-Discipline
4.	Professional environment	Gives real life chief officer experience	Competence, Knowledge
5.	Trip to China to study Chinese businesses	International experience	Diversity, Knowledge, Merit
6.	Cost	Less expensive than other EMBA programs, financial assistance	Efficiency, Investing, Practicality, Reasonableness,
7.	Structured Program	Short 8 week classes, steady paced	Organization, Control
8.	Prestigious and Experienced Instructors	Quality education with professors who have had 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 phrase "Transforming to excellence".

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 transform into excellence with the experts. Our professors are seasoned professionals in their fields and they can offer you real world experiences. Their experiences range from corporate America to in the field experience. Our program is AACSB accredited and 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*

No.	Item	Alignment with Academic Program	
	Achievement of Course Learning Goals		
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 sensitized the various perspectives of the new business environment: ethical, social, political, legal, economic, global, and environmental.	Goal 1: Mastery of Content	YES

Narrative Upon the 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 good 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. Furthermore, I enjoyed working with my team members because they each demonstrated qualities that became assets for the team and that it made it pleasant to complete this project. I have grown as a student and individual because of this project because it has showed me that I can be creative … in a team and still be open-minded to people's ideas and opinions. I will leave Prairie View A&M University well prepared and capable to compete with other college graduates because of this course along with others has developed me into a great intellectual. Furthermore, I am grateful for my team for completing a high quality project and the instructor of this course for helping mold me into a more productive student and person overall.

4. Beyond the Classroom

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

Furthermore, the project was taken to the next level, as proposed in the mini-grant. It was presented to 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 is being communicated to media, as well as Campusto Community Coalition ofTexas, and networking organizationsto spread the mantra of client-based projects in an academic environment.

5. Some Project Outcomes

Based on feedback from students, judges, and other audiences, some outcomes of the project were determined. There was greater faculty engagement with students, that resulted in enhanced student engagement and learning, promoted student development, increase the level of student's critical skills, knowledge, and attitude, and developed awareness, accountability, focus, and compliance among students. An important outcome was improved employability of students lacking high academic achievement (needed for co-ops and internships) since industry considers research experience as an equivalent for relevant professional experience. There was also an increased sense of civic responsibility among students. Moreover, numerous benefits for the client, such as ready and usable research and promotional inputs, and potential for improved business processes and outcomes. Moreover, several institutional outcomes were enunciated, such as the fulfillment of PVAMU, COB, and course; andgeneration of data for research in Service Learning, providing artifacts to establish excellence in research and learning before accreditation bodies such as SACS and AACSB. In addition, institutional prestige is increased, student recruitment is attracted, and enrollment enhances, and attrition rates reduced. There is also 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 stakeholders of PVAMU.

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Projects

A need was felt to ensure greater involvement from top administration of the University. The institution of support through intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards would motivate faculty and students. Further, a concerted effort is needed to enlist the participation of prospective clients and the community. Moreover, it would be helpful to create a diverse panel of judges for project evaluation. Systematic documentation and dissemination of projects, along with programmatic impact evaluation is also in order. To conclude, while great strides have been made in client-based projects within the classroom, much effort still lies ahead in enhancing their 360 degrees impact.

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