ENHANCING STUDENTS' EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: KEYS TO FINDING IDEAL CLIENT-BASED PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

While there are drawbacks to incorporating team projects into business courses, client-based projects (CBPs) provide a form of real-world experiential learning that cannot be equaled through most other methods of instruction. However, this method of instruction can require enormous planning and effort on the part of instructors, often resulting in unpredictable, unsatisfactory results for both students and clients. This paper examines how to elevate the satisfaction level and value of client-based marketing projects for students as well as clients. Offered are practical insights based on several years of instructors' experiences that can make implementation of CBPs for any specific-topic marketing course a more satisfactory experience for all involved.

Real-world business interaction through client-based projects (CBPs) can be a valuable piece of preparation for students in any field. For business students, and marketing majors in particular, this face-to-face interaction is even more essential to students' own perceptions of how much practical preparatory value they have received from their education. This method affects how sufficiently they believe their marketing education has prepared them to work in the real world. Further, in order to allow students to be the beneficiaries of this form of real-world learning, instructors must learn how to be experts in cultivating not only the "best" clients that can provide this for students, but how to structure projects to provide those clients with satisfactory student results.

Providing satisfaction at the highest level possible for both students and clients translates to ongoing relationships to tap for future class projects. These relationships also develop into internships. These ongoing relationships are extremely important because previous research is clear that CBPs are valuable not only to clients and students, but to professors, the universities they are affiliated with, and the communities the universities reside within [2] [4] [6] [9]. These projects are valuable because students have the opportunity to be seen by prospective employers, employers gain much needed problem-solving expertise form students, and instructors benefit because they learn information that keeps them current with what is transpiring in the professional world. So, finding the best clients for students and instructors to have an ongoing relationship with is essential to CBP success.

To ensure CBP success, it is often the instructor who determines who those good clients are [10]. Good clients are those who are not under-involved nor over-involved—they are merely sufficiently involved. The instructor is the individual who recruits, screens, and selects which ones are good and which ones are bad for students to interact and work with. Previous research has established several principles to find workable clients [1] [3] [5] [7] [8] [10]. Part of the success in this area seems driven by how the client is drawn into the academic world and thereby ultimately brought into the classroom.

KEY PRELIMINARY FACTORS FOR INSTRUCTOR TO CONSIDER IN CLIENT SELECTION

Based on the authors' own classroom experiences, there are normally four key categories to be considered in client selection and retention: 1) clients that come to the instructor; 2) clients the instructor recruits; 3) clients that are overinvolved; 2) clients that are underinvolved. The author's experiences encompass nearly five years of ongoing use of client-based projects in the classroom.

Clients that Come to the Instructor

Clients that come to the instructor often do so through three key avenues. One, some clients contact the department chair or business school dean directly and are in search of "free" work from students. Two, there are other clients who come to the instructor through a colleague. Three, clients coming to the instructor may be former students of the marketing department now working in the field a course is linked to. Their initial intention may include a desire to provide an experience to current students they wish they had been able to acquire during their own college coursework. While all three of these methods of contact and introduction are acceptable, those who are unsolicited directly by the instructor more frequently result in what some researchers have categorized as "bad' clients [4] [5] [8] [11] [12].

Clients the Instructor Recruits

Despite the three previously outlined less desirable client avenues, there are methods of acquiring clients that seem to be more effective. Based on the experiences of the author, when the instructor independently finds or seeks out a potential client, the client often proves to be more feasible because those clients have a commitment to furthering students' education by agreeing to be sufficiently involved. Having these clients sign a contract outlining their expected level of involvement is key. This reduces those clients who are in search of students to use for their own purposes. While securing this type of client may require more persuasion on the part of the instructor, they have more understanding that their personal level of involvement and personal level of respect toward students can affect the quality of their project results.

Further, they are more likely to accept that the instructor and students themselves have specific learning objectives, time constraints, and a limited level of real-world expertise. This merely means these good clients are more willing to select and adapt projects to best suit mutual outcome needs. When clients work in this manner, students report more positive attributes about the experience, even if they do not particularly like the topic of the project [10]. In addition to the positive attributes students report when the instructor finds the client, there are two additional factors to consider that an instructor cannot predict until they bring that client into the classroom. These two additional factors are whether the client is overinvolved or underinvolved.

Overinvolved Clients

Overinvolved clients often want to take on the role of an instructor, rather than a consultant. These clients are not always as respectful and helpful to students and sometimes appear to emit an aura of superiority. This has been evident with both graduates and undergraduates, regardless of the age and professional background of the students. It appears these clients consider their real-world knowledge so superior to anyone currently residing in a classroom that they become quite ineffective in explaining or coordinating project details, much less constructive feedback in evaluating student results. These clients

often appear to try to apply tougher, unrealistic standards in evaluating student work. Their oral feedback is at times more scathing, cynical, and ego-driven. They tend to want more time with a class in explaining more about themselves, the importance of their company, and their personal professional position. While there are limited aspects this real-world overinvolved client provides that can be valuable to students, the information is more often not relevant to the project itself, nor to the learning of the course concepts.

Underinvolved Clients

Contrary to the overinvolved client, an underinvolved client is not necessarily a plus either. The underinvolved client does not necessarily want to spend less of their time helping students. Rather, it is more often a lack of time in their schedules. They are more likely not to have a realistic perception of the amount of client input needed during the introduction and midway points of the project. At times they prefer to pass information for students through the instructor, and have the instructor put forth the majority of the effort in explaining the details of the project. This type of client wants the instructor to suggest or evaluate positives and negatives of potential creative ideas in advance. In the final phase of the project, they are more likely to be unsatisfied with students' results and level of creativity, but unlikely to attribute the limited results to their underinvolvement. At times, the sheer enormity of the project scope was unrealistic, which might underscore the importance of the instructor not just evaluating whether the client is good or bad, but whether the project scope and size is appropriate for a CBP.

KEY PROJECT FACTORS TO CONSIDER FOR STUDENT SATISFACTION

Varying the project scope and size to accommodate several projects within one class term can be beneficial to both clients and students. Client-based projects can be created that are small, medium, or large in size and scope, as outlined in previous research [10]. The size, in this case, is defined by both length of time needed for completion, as well as the scope of the project. According to the previously established definitions, a small size project is one that can be completed in one to two weeks, a medium size project can be completed in three to four weeks, and a large size project may extend over an entire term, or at least five to six weeks. In addition to length of time, the scope of the project is an additional structural consideration.

The scope of a small project is defined as anything from designing a logo, name, and packaging for a new product to a brief positioning exercise. An example of a medium scope project could include designing a new brand image for a product or service, or a company or organization. Finally, a project that is defined as large in scope normally involves more in-depth research, more fully developed creative executions, and a more complete advertising campaign.

It is often important to have students experience each, however, as this is more reflective of real-world work. What often works well, if selected and structured appropriately, is to have at least one of each of the three types of projects, if there is more than one project per course within a single term. Having multiple feasible projects gives students the experience of balancing their time, effort, and creativity working on multiple competing projects, all with specific draft and final version deadlines. This more closely reflects a real work experience, at least in the advertising world. Including projects of varied length allows students more exposure to a broader range of real-world experiences, and allows instructors more flexibility to find projects that fit within the course content, learning objectives, and time constraints. When the project length is a good match between student and client's needs, clients see

that adapting their project to fit is efficient and produces useful results. When this occurs, clients are far more enthused about offering not just future classroom projects, but more likely to offer future employment to those students and serve as a professional networking contact. This provides an additional benefit to completing the coursework from the students' perspective.

Key Factors in Students' Perspective of CBP Value

In addition to the satisfaction of forging potential future employment and networking contacts, students reported satisfaction in other areas as well when the clients were appropriately selected. While it was thought that student liking for a specific project topic or subject matter might affect their level of satisfaction, most reported that this did not matter. Most reported that the opportunity for real-world experience was far more valuable than what can be learned from a textbook or lecture on anything. Students stated that applying course concepts through CBPs not only allowed a method to learn concepts more thoroughly, but that they felt they will retain those concepts for a longer period of time. This retention factor, they felt, was an asset in securing employment and performing well in real-world employment.

Further, students believed acquiring a realistic view of the real world helped them decide better, and more specifically, what type of work they wanted to pursue in the future. In fact, some believed that the less they liked the project topic, the more they had to stretch their ability to stay focused and create positive results. They appreciated the challenge of working on multiple projects throughout the term. However, varying the length of those projects if there was more than one was key. During academic terms where there were short projects, but too many of them, dissatisfaction was high. Likewise, when there were fewer projects, but they were too large in scope, dissatisfaction was also high.

Despite of dissatisfaction in some areas throughout the classes examined for this paper, there were other specific factors tied to client behavior that students were satisfied with. They valued clients who made initial classroom visits early in the term, and clearly detailed the desired outcomes at that time. Students also valued clients who returned to the classroom at a midway point to review and discuss a draft version of their preliminary ideas. Clients were praised by students when they made themselves available via email on a consistent basis. However, it was the midway feedback session, in particular, proved to be valuable to both students and clients.

During these midway feedback sessions, students engaged in a confidential sit-down roundtable meeting with the client for about 30 minutes per team. Each team was afforded a room to meet privately with the client during this period. This method was to ensure that competing teams in the class did not have access to another team's ideas until the final project presentations. Each team is assigned a specific time slot they must be present, within the regularly scheduled class period. During the draft preview client visit, all student teams are given a shorter portion of time so that the client need only make one visit for this session. This afforded students an opportunity to give a preview of their overall strategy without the visual support of the final creative executions. This resulted in students feeling that they better honed their oral communication skills and how to sell their ideas orally without the benefit of fully developed written material. This was a much quicker process logistically as well for clients. Students also report that using this procedure helps them feel more competent and confident in moving ahead to the final phase of refining and completing the project. They report feeling re-energized because they have a higher degree of certainty as to which of their ideas are workable and which are not. This midway session is an excellent opportunity to test numerous preliminary ideas to see which aspects of their plan

are headed in the right direction and which are not. This session also allows them the opportunity to learn what is feasible monetarily and logistically.

This real-world feedback is highly valued by students because while they may have excellent ideas from a creative perspective, there may be aspects of those ideas that they may not realize are not feasible in the specific geographic market they are operating within. The client within a certain region can give more specific locale information based on the geographic location, ethnic composition, and socio-economic composition of the specific city in which the university resides. While the instructor can give limited feedback in this direction based on theory or general information written in within a textbook, sometimes real world current knowledge about the specifics of the marketing field—and advertising especially—are best addressed by real-world clients.

In giving this feedback, real-world clients have a much better feel for current day-to-day marketing field practical aspects than instructors. While instructors can give limited feedback that may seem correct, that individual may not be any clearer or certain of what the real-world client working in a specific city will find satisfying in the end. A risk an instructor takes in giving too much specific feedback from the academic perspective is that the client may not be satisfied in some way. The students then feel the instructor is somehow responsible if they take the instructor's advice and the client does not like it. Therefore, sometimes the best move an instructor can make is to "get out of the way" of the interaction between students and clients. Being able to do this, however, depends on having clients who do not rely heavily on the instructor as a consistent intermediary in communicating client desired outcomes.

To achieve successful desired outcomes, the final projects are presented orally to clients and final written work reviewed at that time. Students seem to find this format of evaluation given by the client more valuable than even the project grade assigned by the instructor. Usually they go hand in hand, and if the client gives high marks to a team for their project final results, the instructor will also assess high marks. However, this is not always the case and it is interesting to note that students take the specific verbal and written comments of the client more seriously than those of the instructor. They view clients are more credible and more closely tied to the potential of their real-world success upon graduation. They value the reward of pleasing the client, and getting positive feedback from the client, more than the grade reward given by the instructor.

Conclusions

Based on several academic terms of incorporating CBPs into a specific advertising course within a marketing program, there are several key lessons learned. First, selecting the correct type of client is essential to student satisfaction with the real-world learning experience. But beyond that, students' satisfaction with client selection results in their word-of-mouth advertising of their positive experience. This translates to more demand for that specific course, as well as more credibility and satisfaction with the instructor, as well as any course that instructor has that incorporates CBPs.

If this level of credibility and satisfaction also exists on the client end, they are more likely to maintain an ongoing relationship and reduce the instructor's need to find new good clients. Additionally, from an external public relations perspective, satisfied clients are likely to spread the word of their positive experience with student projects. As a result, the instructor can find it much easier to cultivate more clients to draw from for CBPs. This also results in better prospective contacts for an instructor's marketing students. Given current economic challenges, this may give them a competitive edge in securing one of the more limited employment opportunities that will exist upon graduation.

The hope is that this paper provides a range of suggestions for any marketing instructor to use in selecting clients and projects for their courses that will result in the highest degree of student satisfaction. Ultimately, CBPs may be increasingly important in helping our students be prepared to secure employment in an increasingly competitive real-world environment. Given this increasingly competitive real-world environment, particularly for marketing positions, anything we as instructors can do to ensure greater student success in that real world, is a worthwhile endeavor.

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