**“My last client-based class project was a disaster”: Developing best practices for a successful project process**

ABSTRACT

Client-based or applied projects can provide a host of benefits to students, clients, and the instructor. However, planning and facilitating the projects are often onerous for the instructor and result in unmet expectations for one or more of the participating parties. This session engages participants in a discussion of client-based learning project experiences and provides resources to aid in successful administration of future client-based class projects. Participants will respond to simulated issues encountered during client-based projects and develop tools to aid in design/planning for increased success and met expectations.

*Keywords:* Applied Learning, Client-based Projects, Experiential Learning

INTRODUCTION

A recent survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that while 70% of college students felt they possessed the necessary skills for the workplace, only 30% of employers believed college graduates were ready for the real world (Hart Research Associates, 2015). A scan of the popular and educational press reflects an increased concern on the value added and practicality of today’s higher education. Statements such as, “While our students collaborate in a wider, more fluid horizontal world—boundaryless, diverse, and technologized—we remain vertically institutional no matter what we may profess. It may be time to change the way business schools do business,” (DeGraff, 2016) are the norm. Therefore, business educators are focusing on how to change our approach for educating and preparing students for the challenges and needs of today’s workforce. We need to prove our WORTH!

Business programs are developing and adopting new pedagogical delivery methods to bridge the gap between academia and business practice (Gomes & Yasin, 2011). Incorporating applied or client-based consulting projects can be an effective means to enhance the learning experience of students while meeting the needs of internal and external stakeholders (Foster & Yaoyuneyong, 2016). Client-facing business projects add value to students by providing real-life problem-based learning for building practical business skills while creating developing relationships and creating knowledge for community stakeholders (Razzouk, Seitz & Riskallah, 2003).

This session will lead participants through activities designed to assess and develop ideas for designing and facilitating client-based projects within their courses. As facilitating client-based projects requires work for various phases of the semester and project, the session will examine best-practices and tactics for three phases of the process: (1) Client engagement, (2) Client-student interaction, and (3) Project facilitation. While client-based projects are relevant for all levels of student courses (undergraduate and graduate), consideration and design of the project must be designed to reflect student’s level of knowledge and learning. Undergraduate projects tend to be more direct and shorter in scope with more defined parameters focusing on specific outcomes while graduate projects can be more advanced and open-ended with fewer parameters for greater depth and scope. The necessary approaches, structures and best practices for developing multiple types of client-based projects will be discussed in the session.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

AACSB has charged business programs to bridge the gap between business and academia by enhancing the working relationship with community members for greater learning and beneficial impact. Programs are required to provide evidence of continuous quality improvement in the three core values: Engagement, Innovation and Impact (AACSB, 2017). Client-based projects are a means to meet these core values. Client-based projects are an effective pedagogical approach for bridging management theory with practical application. Client-based learning incorporates problem-based learning to “enhance student ownership of the learning experience” (Lopez & Lee, 2005, p 172), provides active experiential learning on real-world topics and application (Razzouk, et. al., 2003), and incorporates and enhances workplace skills in communication and decision making to develop recruitable skills (Barr & McNeilly 2002).

Wherein the role of a university is not to just provide higher educational degrees but to enhance intellectual capital, client-based projects develop the three essential components: human, structural and client capital (Stewart, 1997). The human capital developed through the projects will increase the knowledge of faculty and students by keeping them in tune with business trends and practices. This practical experience also provides students the insights and skill base for professional success (Cooke & Williams, 2004; Hopkins, Raymond & Carlson, 2011). Client-based projects also allow universities to capture, develop and share knowledge for business and product development in developing structural capital. Through the client-student-faculty interactions, lines of communication are developed for knowledge transfer for continuous learning and organizational development. And finally, client capital is developed beyond the boundaries of the university to create knowledge and practices for the client organizations. External bodies including AACSB and other accrediting bodies, community members and potential employers (Lopez & Lee 2005) are provided an invaluable service through these projects.

Client-based projects are also valuable from a practitioner standpoint. A recent article in Forbes (Bradford, 2016) states that there are “8 real world skills college doesn’t teach you.” Client-based projects hit all eight. 1) For networking and relationship building these projects provide the opportunity for students (and faculty) to network with business professionals to build long-term relationships and while honing networking skills. 2) Setting realistic career goals – these projects allow students to observe and impact the workings of an organization (business in action). 3) Prioritizing tasks and job opportunities – Since client-based projects are problem-based with limited parameters and various impacting factors students will need to establish deadlines and define and prioritize tasks, 4) Use feedback to make revisions – Students receive feedback and input from the instructor and the client throughout the semester. They will need to make adjustments and changes to the project based on these updates, 5) Collaborating on a cross-functional team - Client-based projects go beyond merely splitting up a paper. Students must share the workload, complete primary and secondary research on various aspects of the project and work together to create a complete consulting project, 6) Writing for the workplace – Students are challenged with delivering the findings to the client in a user friendly and applicable business document; this is not an academic paper but real-world plan for change and action, 7) Selling and negotiation – Students will negotiate with team members on process and content of the project and persuasion and selling skills will be needed to convey their findings to clients to convince them of the value of their findings and plan for change/implementation, and 8) Leading a team – this is more than just a grade – it is a real-world plan which required delegation, communication with team members and clients. Completing a group consulting project requires the leadership interpersonal skills to have a successful conclusion.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Participants in the session will:

* Assess the benefits and challenges of incorporating client-based projects in their course(s)
* Determine means for creating a win-win scenario - achieve student learning and skill building while creating applicable knowledge and insight for the client and building community relationships
* Assess the needs and challenges of the three core components of client-based projects: client engagement, client-student interaction, and project facilitation
* Analyze best-practices for implementing client-based projects

EXERCISE OVERVIEW

Client-based projects are a valuable pedagogical tool. While they provide value added component to a course, utilizing these projects are not without their challenges. The activity is designed to encourage participants to engage in the process through simulations associated with each phase.

After introduction and review of the session plan, the presenters will begin by asking the audience, “Who has integrated applied client projects into their classes and how did the experience go?”. After audience feedback is shared (which will be integrated into the session), the presenters share that the birth of this session was based on a conversation regarding where we’ve struggled and what we’ve learned over time when facilitating applied projects. The goal is to share what we’ve learned, but also to learn through others’ experiences and insights.

The presenters set the stage of a class/situation where an instructor desires to engage in an applied project and has a potential/interested client (note: this session is not focused on tips for finding clients, as that varies greatly from school to school based on geographic location, but rather picks up once one is identified).

As explained previously in this application, the applied project session is broken into three phases: (1) Client engagement, (2) Client-student interaction, and (3) Project facilitation. Each phase in the session begins with a brief explanation of what this phase includes and then introduces an example of a communication from the client or students in the class. The communication may be an email, a voicemail (recorded message), or something shared in person (displayed via video). We then ask the participants to discuss how they would manage the situation. For example, in client engagement (phase 1), a voicemail is received from ambitious client (local business owner) that desires students to start working ASAP with his coders regarding a design for a new application. The instructor-client discussion may need to take a step back and focus on scope and the specific question(s) that the students will answer. For phase 3, an instructor starts class and asks for questions. Then s/he receives a barrage of questions regarding the project due next week where students are clearly far behind. This will be displayed via a recorded video of students, and a great deal of assigning blame away from themselves.

For each of the three phases and examples/simulations, the audience participation and insights are followed by examples and lessons from the presenters regarding their experiences. At the end of each phase, the presenters will distribute a handout that includes either a template or resources that can be leveraged.

Overall, the session presenters found that structure and check-points in line with the project’s final goal(s) are most effective for successfully facilitating projects. The structure and deadlines ensure students and clients are both holding up their end of the assignment and can plan in advance. We also provide guidance regarding use of peer feedback throughout the project.

SESSION DESCRIPTION

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| Activity | Time Estimate |
| Introduction of presenters and question to audience regarding experience with applied/client-based projects | 6 to 7 minutes |
| Presenters share birth and goals of session | 2 minutes |
| Presenters set the stage of an applied/client-based project | 3 minutes |
| Introduce Phase 1, play recorded voicemail from client | 2 minutes |
| Large group discussion of Phase 1 and how to respond to recorded voicemail from client | 6 to 7 minutes |
| Presenters share insights and resources for Phase 1 | 4 to 5 minutes |
| Introduce Phase 2, pass out email chain forward by the client. Time to read email. | 4 to 5 minutes |
| Large group discussion of Phase 2 and how to respond to a forwarded email chain from the client regarding miscommunication | 6 to 7 minutes |
| Presenters share insights and resources for Phase 2 | 4 to 5 minutes |
| Introduce Phase 3 - play a video of students asking questions one week prior to final client presentation | 2 to 3 minutes |
| Large group discussion of Phase 3 and how to respond to a video of students asking a barrage of questions one week prior to final presentation and assigning/shifting blame | 6 to 7 minutes |
| Presenters share insights and resources for Phase 3 | 4 to 5 minutes |
| Session conclusion - Presenters wrap-up and thank audience | 3 minutes |
| Q&A plus Additional Audience-led discussion (if time allows) | 3 minutes |
| Total | 53 to 60 minutes |

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