

Making Business World Consulting Experiences a Reality for Undergraduate Education

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ABSTRACT

Experiential-learning is learning by “doing” – learning through a real world experience. Does the experiential-learning experience really benefit the learner? We find many students seeking ways to enhance their learning and, at the same time, enhance their opportunity for choices as they begin their professional career. Could experiential-learning provide such a vehicle for enhanced learning? Many students participating in one such experiential-learning class have expressed the feeling of abundant learning and noted, “I learned more than I have in other classes. It was like we were actual consultants going out in the field to help a company with some of their problems. No class work or lecture can give you this type of experience.” In an effort to try and determine the extent to which experiential-learning classes actually impact the learner, a research project was conducted attempting to ask the following three questions (Hodge, 2004):

- 1. What were the lived experiences of the students participating in experiential-learning courses?*
- 2. What internal changes such as confidence level, feelings towards themselves and the outside world, and career outlook, if any, have occurred for the student?*
- 3. What does the student believe he or she can accomplish after participating in a course conducted using an experiential-learning approach.*

This paper will provide an overview of the experiential course and the findings of the research project.

INTRODUCTION

Experiential-learning is learning by “doing” – learning through an experience. This method of learning has been around for ages; yet, we do not use this method to its full potential. With the

increase in class size and the demands on the economy, schools are finding it more difficult to provide a “real world” experiential experience.

John Dewey’s *Experience and Education* published in 1938 serves as a model and inspiration for progressive educators in the 1930s. We saw a resurgence of this in the 1960s by those who wanted to introduce more experiential-learning into the educational system. (Kraft, 1995)

Today, many students seek ways to enhance their learning, add creditability to a resume, and look for ways to enhance their job prospects by gaining experience in the professional world prior to graduation. Many colleges and universities may also provide this experiential-learning experience through the co-ops and internship programs partnering with many for profit and not-for-profit organizations. However, not everyone has the opportunity, or desire, to spend the additional time such an internship or co-op program would add to their years of education.

An alternative option for students to gain an internship-type experiential-learning opportunity is by enrolling in a course with an experiential-learning approach. But, before we go off and start such a class, one should heed the advice from John Dewey, the genesis of the modern day experiential-learning theorist.

“Knowledge must be linked to experience, not set apart in “abstract, bookish” forms divorced from life. It must be grounded in “the depth of meaning that attaches to its coming within urgent daily interest.” Nevertheless – and here is Dewey’s caveat to educators – “mere activity does not constitute experience.” Rather, experience involves both “trying,” an active component, and “undergoing,” a passive one. (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1998)

THE PARTNERSHIP

The mission of the Technical Assistance Program (TAP) is to strengthen the Indiana economy and improve the quality of life for Indiana citizens. The State of Indiana provides approximately 75 percent of the TAP funding, providing more than \$1 million annually toward providing assistance to Indiana companies. Utilizing a team of 30 Purdue University faculty, graduate students, and professional staff, free assistance is provided on short projects in product development, advanced manufacturing, information technology, management and leadership issues. Dave McKinnis, Director of TAP notes, “TAP is committed to helping Indiana employers connect with Purdue’s talented, hardworking and highly skilled student body and to making Purdue students aware of the many career opportunities available right here in Indiana. TAP connects Indiana businesses and local governments with the vast resources of Purdue University.”

In partnership with the Technical Assistance Program (TAP) and partnering organizations (Indiana businesses), a very innovative educational experience and opportunity have emerged and have been classroom tested. Insights into *Human Resource Applications: An Experiential Approach* is a class that has been developed utilizing the undergraduate student’s learned skills, education, and experience toward solving actual business human relations/human resource issues. The focus of this course is to expose the undergraduate student to "real world" human

resource issues through a real time consulting experience under the mentorship of a qualified faculty member. Human relations, training, lean manufacturing initiatives, leadership training and development are just a few of the issues addressed through the consulting experience. Students must learn to conduct research, communicate through various topical discussions, use their critical thinking skills, think on their feet, and conduct collaborative problem-solving.

THE PROCESS

An Indiana business needing some form of technical assistance will contact the TAP administrator, sharing their particular need for assistance. The issues can range from the simplest of issues to a very broad range of issues. Examples include the development of employee handbooks, establishing an employee evaluation system for exempt and non-exempt employees, assistance in addressing absenteeism or motivational issues, assistance in developing training programs in statistical process control, lean manufacturing, communication skills, team building skills, staffing issues, and leadership issues. The undergraduate student will become part of a consulting team, meeting with the client and addressing the perceived human resource issue, training, and developmental issues through research, discussions and collaborative problem-solving.

In preparing the student for this experience, the class works through the development of a number of different need analyses. After the instructor has contacted the client, students are assigned a client and are then required to develop a custom designed need analysis based on the perceived customer's issues. The need analysis becomes a very valuable tool that provides some structure and still has a great degree of flexibility. With the need analysis in hand and the initial research on the client's issues completed, the students and the instructor will visit the client to discuss the issues and the perceived action needed. This is an opportunity for the students to meet face to face with the company's leadership and often meet with the president, vice presidents, directors and operations or quality assurance managers, human resource professionals. The students are given a free range in asking questions as part of the consulting experience.

To support this initiative, attorneys and human resources professionals will be brought into the classroom to discuss legal issues, laws, recent court rulings, and case studies to help the students reflect on the ramifications of recommendations and whether the decisions may involve any legal issues or violate any government regulations. Certified Human Resource Professionals will demonstrate the use of a SWOT analysis and a GAP analysis to assist the students in the development of recommendations. Sessions on writing policies and procedures for a liberal, moderate, or conservative viewpoint are practiced. Other problem solving tools and issues that relate to the various clients are shared with the students; thus, providing a learning experience and learning environment addressing actual business issues. The fact that the issues are real and current also provides a sense of urgency and worthiness in the work being accomplished.

As the recommendations are developed and assessed by various professionals, the student team and the instructor will return to the client and will make recommendations toward the solution of the problem. In several instances, actual training was conducted on leadership and communication issues to illustrate the validity of the proposals.

FINDINGS

This program is in its second year of testing. As a means to evaluate the effectiveness of this program, a study was conducted to document the lived experience of undergraduate students who participated in this experiential-learning class. The research focused on answering three questions:

1. What were the lived experiences of the students participating in experiential-learning courses?
2. What internal changes such as confidence level, feelings towards themselves and the outside world, and career outlook, if any, have occurred for the student?
3. What does the student believe he or she can accomplish after participating in a course conducted using an experiential-learning approach?

Students participating in the *Insights into Human Resources Applications* overwhelmingly feel as if they have grown as a result of the experiential-learning. Many have expressed the feeling of being appreciated and needed. When the company management is sitting across the table and asking for help or training, the comment made is, “It is interesting to see how they are actually asking me for help and guidance on something I just finished studying in a book or class.” “It is great feeling a sense of worthiness.”

Every student that participated in an experiential-learning course experienced an increase in his or her confidence level. There was expressed new confidence in their ability to communicate with upper management and in their ability to perform in their discipline. Some felt the experience prepared them to talk with people in positions of authority in the business world. Prior to the course the students might have been shy or doubtful that they could effectively communicate with a president, vice-president or an upper manager about an organizational problem because of the students’ lack of experience. That has now changed.

Some students found that the time spent learning in their discipline has yielded positive results. The students found that they could, in fact, perform in the “real world” with the skills and knowledge they acquired while attending Purdue. The students attributed this to having a chance to practice their skills on a “real” project for a “real” organization in “real time.” They noted they were “under the gun” to perform.

Students that participate in the experiential-learning courses appreciate the opportunity to gain “real world” experiences. The phrase “real world” was the students’ words and reflected their impression of the business world. Every student indicated they appreciated the “real world” experience they gained in their experiential-learning course.

Students that participate in experiential-learning courses recognize that there is a difference between experiential-learning courses and conventional classroom courses and they find the differences valuable. One student summed this up very well by noting, “I wouldn’t ever go so far to say that a class is completely worthless because even if something is done wrong you can at least learn how not to do something wrong. But many classes may be as low as 30 to 40

percent value added. This class with the experiential component is closer to 90 percent value added and is as it should be.”

There was one additional finding the students also felt very strongly about. The students that participated in this experiential-learning course felt that the instructor is a vital part of the experiential-learning. Many thought the experience they gained with the instructor and his willingness to allow, and to help, the students learn in a “real world” environment was especially valuable. One student’s comments reflecting this insight noted, “The instructor was very insightful and taught us many things that we could not learn from a textbook. This course was different from any other I have taken throughout my college career. This course has enlightened my college experience.” Another one commented, “If we had to go to the companies without him (the instructor) that would not have been be as meaningful and fun, but he was there guiding us and leading the discussion throughout the consulting experience. We were able to give our own input into it, but it was very valuable for him to be there as our mentor.”

CONCLUSION

Experiential-learning can provide a unique experience and opportunity for the students and a unique mentoring opportunity for the instructor. In fact the students enjoy the experiential-learning experience. Through the opportunity to interact with those in the business world and outside academia, networks are formed, self confidence increases, their view of the business world is broaden, connections between what happens in the business world and the classroom is realized, and more defined career paths are formed. We must recognize that not all classes can be taught with the experiential component; however, a more diligent effort should be made to look for ways to add the experiential component. The perception of new knowledge gained and the significant increase in self-confidence and self-esteem alone should provide the incentive to explore new opportunities for experiential-learning.

One of the participants summed it up very well when she noted, “There were a few things I liked about this class. (1) I like the fact that we could transfer our knowledge from a book into a real-world experience. (2) This class fosters teamwork during the needs analysis sessions, and (3) I strengthened my communication skills by speaking with ‘adults.’ Along the lines of the communication, I feel that I grew more confident when speaking with business professionals. I felt more prepared to answer questions in an interview because I now have some experience in working with various companies. To be quite honest, I don’t have any dislikes about the class and I wouldn’t change anything. I would definitely take this course again!” (Ruby, Reflective Writing Assignment 5/11/04).

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