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Community-Based Learning Project Teaches Marketing Students Skills Employers Desire

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Abstract

Research was conducted by the author to determine whether a community-based learning model teaches students the skills employers are looking for in new marketing graduates¹; specifically, specialty skills to be used to become future leaders in the company such as having good communication skills, the ability to work in teams, possessing a positive attitude and the ability to highlight past experiences from real-world class projects. Marketing students at Regis University take a Consumer Behavior class that participates in community-based projects over the last seven years. The author asked the students how valuable a list of communication and team skills were to them, and assessed their attitudes toward learning and their success with a community-based project. It was found that students learned successful communication skills collaborating with their peers while working on community-based learning projects. The experience increased student confidence, which had a direct impact on having a more favorable attitude overall. The combination of positive attitudes in their marketing skills and hours spent conducting research for their project prepared students for job interviews with better skills and a work sample to discuss during a job interview.

I recently read a story on *The Atlantic* magazine's website that indicated that more than half of America's recent college graduates are either unemployed or working in a job that doesn't require a bachelor's degree.² That got me thinking. As an educator, how do I teach students the skills they need to get a job and how do I make their education relevant to the work place? So, I had to first find out what employers were looking for in marketing graduates for me to be able to assess whether my teaching methods and content I taught my students gave them an advantage over their peers in landing jobs. In essence, I wanted to know, was I properly preparing my students for the workplace? So, I conducted research by emailing an online survey to each of my Consumer Behavior students that I taught over the last seven years. After conducting the research and analyzing the results, it was clear that the teaching method I use, grounded in theory and illustrated with a community-based learning project, teaches students the skills employers are seeking.

When I conducted my research I discovered that employers are looking for marketing

candidates with specialty skills who can become future leaders in the company. New graduates and students who are able to talk about and highlight past experiences from real-world class projects or career-related volunteer opportunities are the type of job candidates who will rise to the top of employers' lists. In addition, employers are looking for three main traits in college graduates: 1) good communication skills, 2) the ability to work in a team and 3) a positive attitude.³

The Changing Learning Environment

As a professor, I've always given my students extensive feedback about their writing and presentations skills along with why it is important to be able to effectively communicate their creative and good ideas in writing and orally, so that finding did not surprise me. Nor did the finding that employers want their employees to be able to work successfully in teams; how many of us work totally alone at our jobs? My guess is not too many. On any marketing project I have ever worked on, I have worked with at least one other person and in most cases four or more people.

However, having a positive attitude as one of the top three traits surprised me. So in addition to validating good communication and team skills, I needed to assess my students' attitudes. I can see why employers want employees with positive attitudes. Successful students and ultimately successful employees present an attitude that makes it clear to everyone around them that they are positive, genuine, competent, self-confident and caring.⁴

I was pleased to see that the research indicated that employers want to hear about student experiences and how they actually count toward job experience. Community-based learning projects are just the vehicle for students to use to highlight their past experiences from real-world class projects. This was significant for me because I always include either a community-based or service-learning component in my classes. In addition, it is an important tenet of Jesuit pedagogy, which is important at Regis University where I teach part-time. Community-based learning

“is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Academic [community-based] learning is a pedagogical approach that links identified community need with curricular outcomes. Students reflect in such a way to gain further understanding of the course content, while also gaining a broader appreciation of their own personal commitment to the common good and to their inner development.”⁵

Furthermore, community-based learning gives students an opportunity to “provide expertise or assistance in an area that meets both unmet [organizational] needs and course learning objectives.”⁶ Several critical elements must be present in every project to be called community-based learning, including:

- The needs of the community, rather than of the academy, determine the nature of the service provided.
- The server and those being served learn and teach.

- The ‘pedagogy of learning through service’ includes structured time for reflection, where students write about their learning experience as they are going through the learning process.
- The emphasis is on accomplishing tasks to meet human and community needs in combination with intentional learning goals.
- It is a philosophy of ‘human growth and purpose, a social vision, an approach to community and a way of knowing.’”⁷

One important tenet of Jesuit pedagogy is taking the time for reflection, which has become a critical piece in my classroom. Reflection gives students a chance to take time and assess how the elements they are learning will help prepare them to be successful in the work place and in society. Through reflections, students begin the basics of communicating their analytical and personal thoughts to create an authentic learning environment. Students learn to reflect critically and analyze their thoughts, rather than just reporting on the marketing elements they learn. Reflection provides an opportunity for the students to process their learnings and share how they feel about the subject matter and the process of learning. This learning method embraces another important Jesuit pedagogical tenet, *cura personalis*, meaning care for the entire person. During the class, learning marketing concepts continues to be important; however, the learnings are strengthened so that students become aware of the cultural, political and even economic factors around them and start practicing how the skills they learn can assist them in social transformation.⁸

Community-based learning projects provide students with skills that can help them become good marketers. In addition, my research indicated that when my students worked on community-based learning projects they: 1) improved their communication skills, 2) learned from each other when working in teams and practiced compromising with each other, 3) learned how to research relevant data and information, 4) improved their confidence by learning more complex information about marketing concepts, 5) learned what it means to be caring and compassionate people by looking at a situation from the perspective of a target market comprised

of people different from themselves. This confidence resulted in more positive attitudes and 5) created a professional quality work sample to discuss with current or potential employers.

The five-week long undergraduate Consumer Behavior class at Regis University was taught to working adults and met weekly for four hours. The students in this class were majoring in marketing. In this particular class three of the eight students had teenage daughters. This is significant because the students were doing a project about a spa for teenage girls. The Regis students conducted a competitive and consumer analysis for University of Denver (DU) students and their faculty advisor (known as the client). Six months prior to the class, the client had participated in a national competition, The Global Spa and Wellness Summit in Aspen, CO, to define the spa of the future and had won first place for their idea to create a spa specifically for teenage girls. As a result of winning, a national spa management company approached the client to ask them if they were interested in going into business together because the management company wanted to open spas to this target market across the United States. The client was interested in exploring the possibility of a partnership with the management company, but first they needed additional information. Given that the client was a start-up company with no staff, no money and limited time and marketing knowledge, they needed help conducting their research. My students conducted the research and provided the client with recommendations for their business plan before meeting with the spa management company.

Student Learners in Action

Each week's class included a discussion about essential marketing topics such as: branding, positioning, target marketing and segmenting so that the students learned the fundamental marketing elements. Between classes, students worked independently conducting extensive research to write weekly papers demonstrating their knowledge of the marketing concepts while working on their written communication skills. The students' research enabled them to complete the following assignments, which resulted in them

compiling one final report to present to the client with their findings and recommendations:

- Providing a consumer analysis with demographics, psychographics, behavioral characteristics
- Recommending a location for the flagship spa – geographical characteristics
- Writing a value proposition
- Identifying the service and product offerings at the spa
- Identifying the target market and how to message to it
- Writing a positioning statement
- Describing the online and social media elements to be used by the spa

During class, students worked in teams to apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate their research. During these discussions, students also took into account the feedback received on their individual papers and revised their work accordingly.

When There's More to Learning

In preparation for writing their individual papers, students spent hours searching for information relevant to their learning outcomes and client goals. During this time, they learned how to conduct research and use the resulting information in a meaningful way to help them make recommendations to their client. For example, the students conducted research to identify the best location to build a flagship spa. The client had separately conducted research and indicated it liked Orange County, California, for the flagship spa because residents had a high level of disposable income. After conducting research and discussing their findings in class, my students soon realized that not only was the disposable income high in Orange County, but so was the cost of housing. The students demonstrated their understanding of the concepts by explaining that much of the potential spa clients' disposable income was spent on housing. Therefore, the students needed to conduct additional research to look for additional U.S. cities with an index in which disposable income was high while the cost of living was low. When their research was completed, they compared the indexes of Orange County along with the other cities they selected. The client was pleased with the students'

recommendations since the student research described the importance of indexing and how using one or two factors does not provide an accurate description of the cost of living in a city. Given the student findings, it became clear Orange County was not a good location for the flagship spa.

Theoretical learning and applied learning are essential elements to be taught in tandem. When students learn a concept and then apply it in a real situation, it helps them learn the concepts in a meaningful way that is difficult to forget. For the client during class, students experienced what it was like to be a marketer. For example, marketers regularly work on projects in which clients require all team members to sign a non-disclosure agreement to protect the ideas and concepts. On the first night of class my students and I signed a non-disclosure agreement with the client.

Service learning – Lessons Learned

Research on the effectiveness of community-based learning began in February 2012 with a link to an online survey emailed to 19 of my previous consumer behavior students. Forty-two percent of the students completed the survey, which asked them to indicate: 1) which communication skills were valuable at work, 2) which team skills were valuable at work, 3) their attitudes about learning new marketing skills before the class, 4) their attitudes about their marketing skills after taking the class, 5) their level of preparedness in meeting employer needs and 6) whether they discussed their spa project at work or in interviews.

Obtaining specialty skills to be used to become future leaders in the company

The respondents indicated they learned much more about themselves than just how to market goods and services when working on community-based projects. Factors the students identified to help them succeed included:

- The ability to focus on the project
- A desire to be challenged
- A desire to learn
- Willing to invest in the hard work to succeed
- First hand experience working on a real project instead of just reading about how to do it in a book

Communication skills

Working for the client provided the students with an opportunity to develop and strengthen their critical thinking skills by reporting on their findings and describing the significance to their peers. They also had to combine the data with the marketing concepts in a relevant and meaningful way. The students described how they were able to make decisions based on inference. They described how they made logical conclusions based on their research. One student in class shared that he described the class project to his colleagues at work and used it as an example to describe how they should be using the outline of the class project to help guide and direct them for their project at work. The student communicated to his employer that: “using [the outline received from class] is how we should be better researching our potential campaigns, and market development activities.” Working on this project gave the student the tools, confidence and knowledge to share his ideas with his team at work. He told his peers at work: “In my opinion, we were lacking a lot of specific details such as better demographics, no psychographics, census and income data and lifestyle choices.”⁹

A positive attitude

The survey respondents indicated their attitudes toward learning marketing skills became more favorable as a result of community-based projects. At the beginning of class 62.5 percent of respondents indicated they knew a lot about marketing. Post class, 75 percent of students indicated they knew more about marketing. The research conducted supports the attitude inference perspective which holds that attitudes based on knowledge predicted behavior better than attitudes based on low-relevance knowledge. Attitude-relevant knowledge (also called issue-relevant knowledge or working knowledge) has been defined as the number of attitude-relevant beliefs and experiences that come to mind when encountering an element that would affect a student’s attitude.¹⁰ The survey respondents indicated the relevance of the content of knowledge may often play a role in the impact of attitudes on attitudinal processes. What this means is that the students increased their level knowledge and in turn positively impact their attitudes toward learning. For example, one student found learning

by doing a “real-life project and working with other classmates that have real-life experience (and maturity)” were the most important factors in learning the content.

Ability to work in a team

Research¹¹ supports that organizations with clearly defined teams are more successful compared to individuals working alone. Teamwork is essential for creating better work and increased bonding among peers. Students need others to discuss ideas with. Survey respondents indicated teamwork was extremely important in servicing the client and meeting their goals. For example, one student shared ideas on why she was successful, “we engage[d] in teamwork. Teamwork and collaboration helped us to find a marketing solution that was best suited for the organization.” The respondents’ comments supported research on teamwork when they described how they discussed their thoughts among team members, evaluated pros and cons and explored alternatives together to identify the best possible solution. They were also able to accomplish the project at a faster pace working in a team than individually.¹² While working in teams, the students got to know each other better, which reduced the chances of unnecessary conflicts and they learned as much from each other¹³ as they did from the facilitator.

New graduates and students who are able to talk about and highlight past experiences from real-world class projects

On a tangible basis, after a community-based project is completed, students have a well-researched and reasoned paper and presentation to add to their portfolio. After the final presentation was given, the students engaged in a discussion with the client so that in the end, the server (the students) and those being served (the client) learned from and taught each other. The survey respondents described the many benefits of not only completing a class toward their degree, but the importance of a work sample. They described the value of their project as resulting in experience collaborating and working with a team. It showed them how a project idea is implemented. One respondent posted the work sample to her LinkedIn resume. Another respondent described the benefit this way: “This project has been able to be added to my portfolio

as specific evidence to my skills and capabilities, not as an ‘imagined’ project but a real work assignment.”

On a non-tangible basis, the students transcended the learning environment and illustrated how these experiences will benefit them as professionals. For example, one of the requirements of the project was that the students researched the psychographics of teenage girls and learned the complex behaviors of these young girls. During class, one of the students with a teenage daughter described an episode in which her daughter was emotionally distressed. Rather than dismiss her feelings, the student (the mother) felt as though the research she conducted for class helped her to better understand the emotional struggles of her teenage daughter and as a result, the mother showed her daughter more compassion and patience during the incident.

Another example of how one respondent’s ability to communicate her feelings and work with her peers in teams helped her learn more about marketing was when she described how she analyzed her research findings in a way that was different from the rest of the class. After a couple of weeks of struggling, the student discussed her struggle with the research with her team members. After the student reflected, she realized the research she was conducting brought up feelings she felt as a teenager. The attachment to her feeling of being a teen was affecting her research analysis. The student described in class how detachment was critical in separating her personal feelings of when she was a teenager from what she thought teenage girls of today needed. After detaching, she was able to listen to the different perspectives of her peers and analyze the research in a way that was meaningful to the project and less personal to her.

Transcending the Role of Student Marketer

The students felt honored to be working on behalf of the client, and they became extremely invested in the success of the project. They demonstrated this by enthusiastically working intently and putting extra time to think through and complete assignments. Students mentioned they felt pressure to succeed and do their best on behalf of

the client and they did not want to let each other down. One student described how her experience working for the client was significant to her, “The in-class discussions [we had helped us in] assisting the business. [This meant that I knew] the project was directly helping the community, which generated an even greater commitment and excitement...since not only was it a reflection of my work, it had the potential to help an [organization].” In addition, another student described the most important learning experience in the class was learning to research a project, that at first was not at all interesting to him. After conducting research, which created a more complete picture of the project, he described how he could see the value of doing the research and appreciated the entire project. The students’ efforts did not go unnoticed by the client. At the end of class, the client commented on how much they appreciated that “the consultants were enamored with our product.”

In conclusion, by integrating community-based projects into my teaching methods, survey respondents indicated that working in teams enhanced their learning process and enriched their learning experience. The experience increased student confidence in their marketing skills, which had a direct impact on having a more favorable attitude. The combination of positive attitudes in their marketing skills and hours spent conducting research for their project enabled students to speak as experts about their experience. In addition, students experienced the mundane tasks marketers face on a daily basis, and they experienced the joys of exceeding client expectations by providing innovative, thought-provoking marketing strategies and materials. These teaching techniques result in students possessing the skills to be ready to contribute to a company’s success as soon as they get hired. HJE

Notes

¹ Emily Driscoll of Fox Business reported on the findings of a study conducted by Millennial Branding, which surveyed 225 employers using Experience Inc.’s data pool of over 100,000 U.S. companies. This information was included in the article: “What Employers Want from College Grads.”

² Jordan Weissman, “53% of Recent College Grads Are Jobless or Underemployed—How?” *The Atlantic*, April 23,

2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/04/53-of-recent-college-grads-are-jobless-or-underemployed-how/256237/>.

³ Emily Driscoll, “What Employers Want from College Grads,” *FOXBusiness*, June 4, 2012, <http://www.foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/2012/06/04/what-are-employers-want-from-college-grads/>.

⁴ Bob Roth, “College Students Should Develop an Attitude of Success,” *College Success*, December 13, 2010, <http://collegesuccess.blog.com/2010/12/13/college-students-should-develop-an-attitude-of-success/>.

⁵ Denise Cope and Amy Sheber Howard, *Academic Service-Learning Brochure* (Denver, CO: Regis University, 2007).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Quoted from anonymous survey responses.

¹⁰ Leandre R. Fabrigar, Steven M. Smith, Richard E. Petty, and Stephen L. Crites, Jr., “Understanding Knowledge Effects on Attitude-Behavior Consistency: The Role of Relevance, Complexity, and Amount of Knowledge,” *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 90, no. 4 (2006): 556-577.

¹¹ “Importance of Teams and Team Work,” *Management Study Guide*, <http://www.managementstudyguide.com/importance-of-team.htm>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

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