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# Sequential Course Integration Strategy For Client-Based Project Success

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**Abstract** - The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has encouraged linking classroom theory with real-world business practices (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). AACSB stresses that “student learning is the central activity of higher education” (2008: 59). This paper reflects the efforts of two marketing professors to develop a sequential course integration that links classroom theory with real-world practices. This was accomplished using an undergraduate marketing research class to collect primary data. The data was channeled to student teams in an MBA marketing strategy class as part of their situation analyses in the development of marketing plans for a client. This mirrors sound businesses practices followed by industry. Additionally, it provides a model to which students can relate and gives the students an added sense of purpose knowing a client will use their findings.

**Keywords** - marketing research education, applied student learning, client based projects, course coordination, marketing education, marketing pedagogical research.

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners** – The sequential course integration strategy discussed in this article provides a method to teach marketing research that can enhance student learning and interest in marketing research, and enhance the quality of the project presented to the client.

## Prior Research On Client-Based Projects

It is well documented that marketing educational research is essential to improving the quality of instruction in higher education (Urbancic, 2009). Experiential learning as well as client-based projects are often considered effective pedagogical tools (Goodell and Kraft, 1991; Lepkowska-White and Parsons, 2006; McEachern, 2001) that augment student learning (Peterson, 2011). Experiential learning is learning that occurs through experience, by “doing” (Verner et al., 2005), and is commonly defined through Kolb’s (1984: 38) definition: “experiential learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. Experiential learning encompasses a variety of activities including using Second Life game (Nicovich, 2012), internships, student teaching, cooperative education, consulting, role playing, business simulations, service learning, and client-based projects (See Moore 2010 for further activities), and is considered appropriate (Burgess, 2012) and valuable preparation for various disciplines (West, 2010). While these other approaches are beneficial, Milner (1995) argues that client-based projects surpass other experiential learning activities by offering students an even more comprehensive learning experience.

Client-based projects (CBPs) involve students addressing a problem for a business client (Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2009). Business clients can follow a spectrum from small, local businesses to large organizations, and include both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. Since marketing is considered an applied discipline, West (2010: 13) argues that it is “more important than in any other academic area, for students to have practice and become proficient in applying the concepts,” which occurs most advantageously through CBPs. Along the same lines, Lopez and Lee (2005: 172) argue that CBPs are a “powerful pedagogical tool.”

CBPs are effective for many reasons. Foremost, CBPs add realism to course topics (Razzouk et al., 2003) and are highly reflective of the business world that graduating students are soon to experience (Harman, 2009). Research conducted by Bourner et al. (2001) compared student evaluations from two courses, one which included a project for an existing organization, whereas the other course included a project for a non-real organization. The results of the study indicated that students placed higher value on the project that was conducted for an existing organization compared to the project for a non-real organization. West (2010) also demonstrated similar findings regarding the importance of realism by finding that students considered the real world experience resulting from CBPs as more valuable than information learned through a textbook or lecture and that student liking for a given project topic or course subject did not affect their valuation of the CBP. Furthermore, research indicates that student enjoyment (Lawson, 1995) as well as perceived value of the learning experience (Graeff, 1997) is heightened through CBPs.

Additionally, research demonstrates that higher levels of learning occur through the use of CBPs and experiential learning (Ramocki, 1987) through augmenting the level of student involvement and engagement (Morgan et al., 1987; West, 2010). Students’ motivation to perform well is enhanced as a result of knowing that their work may be potentially used by the client (Fox, 2002; Goodell and Kraft, 1991). Likewise,

learning becomes the ownership of the student (Smith and Van Doren, 2004; West, 2010), which also enhances student motivation and interest to learn (West, 2010) and further triggers students to become active learning participants (Humphreys, 1981). Moreover, material learned through CBPs is often considered to be more memorable and more highly retained than material learned through typical lectures. In a study by West (2010), students that completed a client-based project acclaimed that they learned more thoroughly and would remember the material longer.

Besides enhancing learning, motivation and enjoyment, several important skills can be developed through CBPs that are imperative to the skills needed in the business world. Through working in a team environment, interpersonal skills can be enhanced (Peterson, 2011). Additionally, problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and decision making skills can be strengthened (Barr and McNeilly, 2002; Carver, 1996; Kennedy et al., 2001) as well as improving student confidence and competence (Pollack and Lilly, 2008; Ramocki, 1987). Furthermore, in a study by West (2010), students revealed that CBPs assisted them in choosing the career path they wanted to pursue after graduation.

Students are not the only benefactor of CBPs. Faculty, the university, and community can also be benefactors of these projects. CBPs have the potential for forging strong relationships between the instructor and the client or the university and the client (Peterson, 2011). These relationships can then be utilized to advance faculty research agendas (Elam and Spotts, 2004) through offering faculty insight for developing a case study or highlighting new research topics, motivating a literature review, or facilitating data collection for academic research (Lopez and Lee, 2005). CBPs can also further faculty and university networking opportunities (Cooke and Williams, 2004) as well as consulting opportunities (De los Santos and Jensen, 1985). Moreover, universities can use these projects as public relation tools to enhance the brand image and community perceptions of the university (Lopez and Lee, 2005). An additional outcome can be the strengthening the institution and community relationship (Cooke and Williams, 2004; Goodell and Kraft, 1991; Razzouk et al., 2003) and potentially the generation of monetary donations (Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2009).

In summary, prior work demonstrates the high value of CBPs and their corresponding benefactors, including students, instructors, clients, and the community and university at large (Easterling and Rudell, 1997; Fox, 2002; Haas and Wortruba, 1990; Linrud and Hall, 1999; West, 2010). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to offer a pedagogical tool to augment the client-based project experience through integrating synergistic undergraduate and graduate courses. The tool we designed was for an undergraduate marketing research course and a graduate marketing strategy course. The aim of this project was to enhance students' understanding of the marketing research process, procedures, and theories learned in the classroom and to strengthen university-client relationships by providing the client more comprehensive information.

## The Project

Two years ago, members of the local community decided to organize and host an annual music festival. A committee of volunteers was convened. Following the first festival, no specific feedback was gathered on what attendees liked and disliked or how they had heard about the festival. The second festival was scheduled for spring 2013. As volunteers began the planning process, the college was contacted to provide business expertise and guidance and an opportunity for sequential course integration for a client-based project was born.

Coordination between faculty members is essential for sequential course integration to be successful. In this instance, two faculty members in the marketing department were able to coordinate classes and projects and provide assistance to the festival volunteers.

This became a marketing project for two different classes. One professor assigned the music festival to his MBA Strategic Marketing class, dividing the class into groups and assigning three groups to the project. This professor has found from past experience that a wider range of ideas for the client is generated using multiple, independent groups. If there is a census of opinion between all three groups, it provides stronger support for those ideas.

The other participating class was an undergraduate marketing research class in which the professor was seeking real projects for her students. Performing the research for an actual client gave the students a seriousness of purpose. Before the MBA class began its phase of the project, the undergraduate marketing students collected primary data that could be used in the development of marketing plans.

### *The Marketing Research Class*

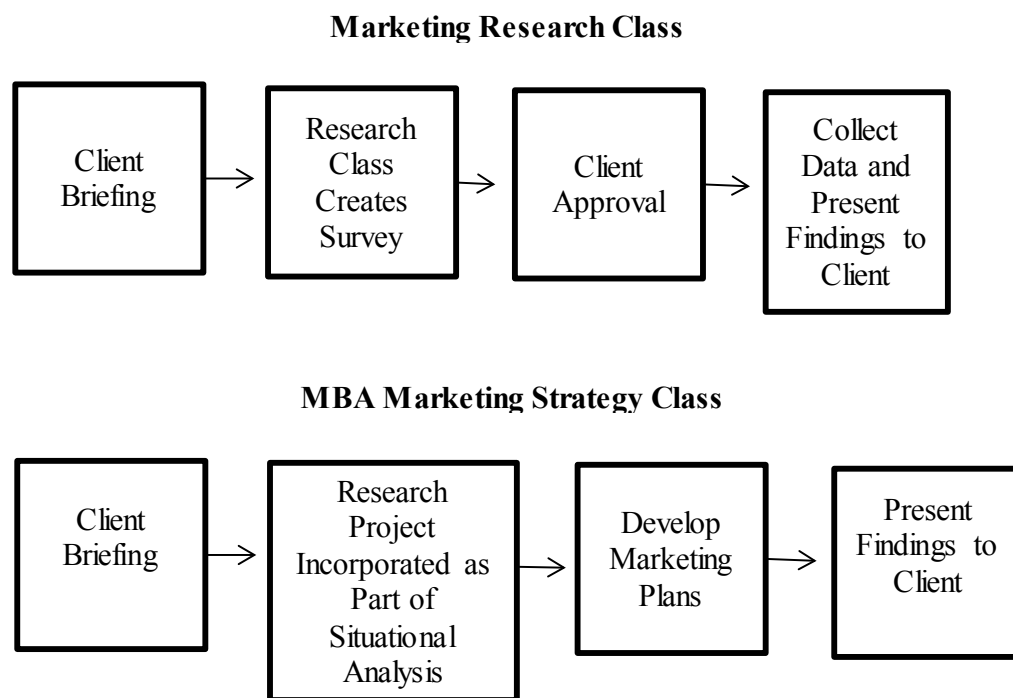
The MBA class was asked to help develop a marketing plan for the festival. Class members can do a great deal of secondary research; however, they could only guess about how people had heard about the festival and the experience people were having at the festival. Therefore, the undergraduate marketing research class was incorporated into the project to collect primary data. Because the students would have access to people attending the festival, there was a captive audience, creating an ideal situation for gathering data. The client met with the marketing research class and told the students what kind of data was needed. The class was divided into research teams and each team developed a questionnaire. The class, under the guidance of the professor, consolidated ideas and produced one revised questionnaire. The client reviewed the questionnaire. Upon final approval from the client, the marketing research class was able to collect data at the festival.

Each research team was assigned a different demographic to analyze and prepared a report for the client. Group reports were later consolidated into one report by the professor. Because the students were presenting to a client, the work was taken seriously. A final report was given to the music festival committee and to the MBA instructor for use the following semester.

*The MBA Marketing Class*

The results of the primary research collected by the marketing research class were provided to the MBA students. The MBA students then met with the committee of volunteers for the music festival to gather as much information as possible. Next the students collected secondary data. After combining the primary and secondary data, the project groups were able to develop meaningful marketing plans for the music festival. These plans were presented to the client. The model for the sequence integration is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Sequential course integration for client-based project.



An ongoing project such as this provides a framework for both classes for an extended period of time. It can be incorporated into the classes year after year. In business, as marketing plans are developed, situational analysis and background information are key components to the success of the plan. In the MBA class, the students would have been mostly limited to secondary data. Having primary research for a specific project combined with secondary research provided information for the development of a superior marketing plan. This coordination between classes gave students from both classes a model for sound business practices.

## Outcomes For The Client

When conducting a class project for small businesses or organizations in a community, the quality of the finished product impacts on the reputation of the instructor, college, and university. Sequential integration enhanced the final product. The coordination of effort between these two classes provided a means for channeling valuable information that was then used in the development of marketing plans and recommendations for clients. Both faculty and clients were involved in the evaluation of the student presentations and final write-ups and both deemed that the student effort was excellent.

## Outcomes For The Students

No measures of Assurance of Learning were developed for this project, however, evidence from course evaluations supports that the client project impacted student interest in marketing research. Particularly, undergraduate marketing research students enrolled in the fall and spring courses showed no difference in student interest in the subject before taking the research course ( $\mu_{\text{fall}} = 3.04$   $\mu_{\text{spring}} = 3.07$ ), while students that participated in the integrated client-based project (spring semester only) demonstrated more interest in marketing research after taking the course ( $\mu_{\text{fall}} = 3.35$   $\mu_{\text{spring}} = 3.58$ ). This indicates that the project not only benefited the client, but also stimulated student interest in the course subject. Additionally, anecdotal information is available. For example, students in both classes mentioned in the narrative section of course evaluations that they enjoyed participating in a project for a real organization. In observing presentations to clients, with the students in business attire using well developed aids, it was apparent that the presence of clients provided a sense of added professionalism to the course.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper adds to the existing literature on client-based projects and experiential learning by presenting another avenue for implementing course projects by integrating undergraduate and graduate courses to enhance the student learning experience as well as quality of information conveyed to the client. This sequential integration offers clients a well-rounded and more thorough analysis of their existing problem and fosters deeper relationships among the university, the client, and the surrounding community.

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