Management Projects in Service Learning: Outcomes from a Rural Learning Laboratory

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ABSTRACT

Implementing Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984) through service learning and community-based learning pedagogy, while simultaneously extending this pedagogy into venues beyond the "usual suspects" (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. 2012a), students in an undergraduate organizational behavior course at a rural New York State college conducted management-focused group projects as external consultants in a broad variety of community-based organizations. Methodology for creating these projects is presented, as well as student responses to an outcomes survey that demonstrated the students' positive perceptions about the change in course format, the students increased sense of self-efficacy regarding their management and individual skills, their increased awareness of social responsibility and citizenship, and their increased connection with their college and their local community.

INTRODUCTION

For those who accept the theoretical and practical values of Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984), service learning and community based learning are a welcomed pedagogy for integrating the experience of the work setting with the conceptual frameworks of the classroom. Using this pedagogy, this study presents a potential methodology for expanding the benefits of service learning and community based learning for management students in management work settings. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse defines "community-based organizations engaging in service-learning [that] can include social service and other non-profit providers, community-based youth development organizations, after-school programs, and faith-based organizations" (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2012a). While covering a broad spectrum of community service and religious organizations, for-profit companies are conspicuous by their absence. The implication is that management students cannot derive the educational and practical benefits of service learning pedagogy in their management field of study.

In contrast, this study, based in a rural geographic area, extended areas of service learning in community-based organizations to include for-profit companies in conjunction with non-profit organizations in healthcare, education, and social services. A critical component of this approach was assessing the role served by small, local businesses in rural communities as contributing to the overall economic, social, and cultural impact of their communities. In small, rural economies, both in terms of business opportunities and community services provided, each

organization is arguably more important than in larger, more dilute cities. As such, all these rural-based entities can collectively be labeled community-based organizations.

Implementing the hypothesis that organizational behavior students learn more about organizational behavior by living it than reading it, an undergraduate organizational behavior course in a liberal arts college located in a small city (<15,000) in rural, upstate New York utilized a four-county area to conduct eighty-two management–focused group projects in fifty-three work sites at forty-one organizations over six semesters. The management focus across all projects, regardless of organizational sector or specific organization, demonstrated the universal need for management skills in projects that local supervisors lacked the necessary time and/or expertise to address. Again, these needs may have been more pronounced because of their rural setting.

METHODOLGY

On-site, community projects were developed through email contact with local (four county, 25-mile radius) organizations. Site supervisors were encouraged to identify management-related projects to be conducted on-site by a three-four member student group serving as external consultants under the joint supervision of the site supervisor and the professor. The professor assisted site supervisors in developing project descriptions.

Site placement was a two step process. First, student teams were created by the professor based on the students' schedule and availability. Students were expected to devote four hours per week for ten weeks on site, so student teams were created among students with a common four-hour block of time. Once in groups, student were presented with the project descriptions and asked to rank their preferences (usually five to seven projects were ranked). The professor then created a best match of team and project based on team rankings.

In addition to on-site responsibilities, students also participated in a weekly organizational behavior class during these ten week projects. During each class, students discussed the activities at the work site and their progress with the specific project. The remainder of the class addressed course content from the reading. In addition, following a central tenet of service learning (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2012b), students wrote weekly reflection papers that merged specific theoretical content from that week's text chapter with the practical applications observed by students at their work site. Grading of these reflection papers was predicated on the quality of the student's synthesis of theory and practice.

Other course requirements included two group presentations with seven-page papers, plus a final examination. The first presentation, midway through the semester, presented the practitioner organization: mission, customers, culture, etc. and briefly addressed the group's project. The final presentation, which site supervisors often attended, focused on the process and outcomes of the group project. At the end of the semester, students completed the usual college course/professor evaluations, and a second survey, seeking student perceptions of their service learning experience, was also administered.

RESULTS

This organizational behavior course has utilized the community-based service learning format in ten class sections over six semesters. During these six semesters, as noted earlier, students have conducted eight-two projects at forty-one sites. The breadth of these organizations is presented in Table 1. Organizations have been collapsed into three broad categories: For-Profit, Government, and Non-Profit, and further collapsed into subcategories showing the many varied types of organizations. While approximately half (20 organizations, 49%) met the established definition of Community-Based Organizations (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. 2012a), the majority (51%) were for profit (17 organizations, 41%) and government (4 organizations, 10%). Furthermore, in contrast to the government and nonprofit organizations, there was considerably more variety in the for profit organizations, with nine types of retail and three types of manufacturing organizations.

Similarly, Table 2 presents general descriptions of the on-site projects. These categories are entirely subjective and are simply intended to show the general types of projects and skills employed by students. The largest category of projects were general management projects (N=19, 23%) that involved program assessment, benchmarking research, and subsequent recommendations to management. The second highest project frequency was Human Resource Management-related projects (N=17, 21%), including training, surveys, salary and recruiting research, etc. Next came marketing projects (N=14, 17%), which principally focused on upgrading practitioners' social networking websites to be more attractive to twenty-something consumers. These projects principally involved automobile dealerships. Other project areas included program and/or community business development (N=10, 12%), information technology review and user satisfaction (N=8, 10%), followed by fund raising (N=4, 5%), finance (N=3, 4%), safety (N=2, 2%), and other (N=5, 6%).

Much like Lewin's Change Theory (1951), the format of this organizational behavior course represented a paradigm shift for these students far more accustomed to the traditional, in class, teaching format. During the first two semesters particularly, students initially displayed some resistance stemming from self-doubts and unperceived self-efficacy. As the course progressed, however, they began to understand their own capabilities and accepted the merits of these on-site projects. This shift has been evident in the student course/professor evaluations of this organizational behavior course and format, which have been very strong. In Table 3, using a five-point Likert scale, scores for the ten sections over six semesters for "Learned a lot in this course" ranged from 4.75-4.00, mean=4.50 and median=4.59. Similarly, scores for "Overall Effective" ranged from 4.9-4.1, mean = 4.63, median = 4.69. Student comments regarding the course included "really enjoyed this class, "learned a lot," "had fun-my favorite class so far," "great job in teaching and opportunity to gain experience," "great class-never get rid of the class," "projects were great," "projects awesome," "wish other classes had projects." Institutional memory through word of mouth has allayed these fears more recently, as most students are aware of and now seek the value of these class projects, and the recent course evaluation measures have been the strongest observed to date.

In addition to student/professor course evaluations, student perceptions pertaining to this course and format were collected (Table 4). Preliminary analyses of these data (N=168) showed

50% or more of the students indicated the course and its project had a positive effect on eighteen of twenty dimensions surveyed. With skill development and self-efficacy the concomitant goals of the course, selected results demonstrate the 90% of respondents felt they had improved their functional skills in communications, assertiveness, and problem solving. Similarly, 73% saw improvement in occupational skills (computer, time management), 68% improved their abilities to work and learn independently, and 67% had improved self-confidence and their sense of personal achievement, while 74% felt they better understood their potential strengths and weaknesses. In addition, 79% felt they had been able to apply their classroom-derived knowledge to their work site, and 71% indicated the project enriched their classroom learning. In the short-term, 83% perceived an increased positive attitude towards experiential programs, and, for the longer term, 67% noted a positive attitude towards community involvement and their sense of citizenship, and 56% had a heightened sense of social responsibility. Specific outcomes related to their college showed 71% had better relationships with faculty and 61% indicated a more positive attitude towards their academic studies. Also, 61% felt this project experience would improve their Grade Point Average, 56% felt more positive towards their college, and 54% felt more committed to staying at their college and finishing their degree. In summary, by linking classroom and practitioner site learning, students reported positive perceptions related to their individual growth, their connection to their college and its academics, and their connections to their external communities.

Other results are shown briefly in the remaining tables. Table 5 demonstrates the students' connection to their work site. Using a four-point scale, students indicated a 3.5 overall level of comfort and purpose through their work site. First-time practitioner supervisors were often a little unclear how much to orient the students and at times, it took a period of adjustment for them to learn that the students were more competent and independent than the supervisor anticipated.

Table 6 indicates that for 95% of respondents (N=162) the projects either confirmed their choice of major or had no effect on the students' selection of major, with only one student actually changing his/her major. Secondary analysis of enrollment data showed 127 business majors (74% of all enrollees) took this course in the last six semesters so these survey results imply that that this course was well accepted by business majors because few, if any, left the major.

Student support for the projects was also borne out in Table 7, where 93% of respondents indicated the project work was better than (35%) or equal to (58%) work done in the classroom. Given that the goal was to have students merge classroom and practice, these results suggest that both were well-received and in combination; neither grossly overshadowed the other. Students were able to comprehend both approaches and they thereby successfully integrated the content with the practice.

Similarly, in conjunction with and confirming the perceptual data in Table 7 and Table 4, 85% of students incorporated their project and classroom learning "Adequately" or better (Table 8). Furthermore, all but one student experienced some incorporation of learning.

Perhaps most the most encouraging analysis from these respondents stems from the 95% whose "Overall Rating" of the format was "Excellent" (59%) or "Good" (37%). Clearly there was widespread acceptance and commitment to the service learning goals and process within this course. A similar percentage (94%) also responded that service learning projects should be included as a component of the business major (Table 10).

DISCUSSION

Merging Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984) and community-based service learning (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. 2012a, 2012b) has shown the value of placing students in practitioner settings. Such interactions have helped breakdown the "separate silos" (Peters, 2010) that previously kept academic and practitioner sites disconnected. Today, through community-based service learning, academics and practitioner supervisors are collaboratively integrating students into these work sites to achieve new benefits for today's students through on-site learning.

The current study presents a new focus, a focus on management projects, as yet another vehicle to engage business and management students in community-based learning stemming from these community work sites. The experiences and the results articulated by these students strongly support the role of management-focused, on-site practitioner projects as a critical element of an undergraduate course in organizational behavior. Being based in a rural geographic setting, these students nevertheless conducted eighty-two management-type projects in over forty organizations. The rural nature of the college's location is part of this solution, as 1) these small businesses are more amenable to feeling the students are part of their small community, and 2) being small and rural suggested that these supervisors may have fewer avenues to access current management theory and practice. Thus, the students arrive with developing skills that need a location where they can apply these skills, and rural supervisors welcome the additional expertise and opportunities to have value-added outcomes with a minimal investment of their critical resource, their time. Students then completed surveys pertaining to their perceived outcomes resulting from this experience. The results are markedly positive and strongly support the continued role of these projects as an educational tool.

Subsequent research is needed, however, to better assess the causal role of the projects. While the outcomes indicated high percentages of positive perceptions, additional research may be better able to address specific behaviors causing specific outcomes, such that projects could be tailored to address specific strengths and/or weaknesses of individual and/or groups of students in order to help students become more enlightened about these various qualities and how they can incorporate behavioral feedback to reinforce or extinguish selected behaviors.

Secondly, these results need to be reassessed longitudinally to assess any relationship between these projects and subsequent career successes. Did improvements in student self-efficacies improve student confidence and risk taking? Did students discover on-site attributes that helped direct them towards or away from specific career options? Much like internships that can show a student that a particular industry or culture is not for him/her, so, too, may these work site projects improve student awareness about who they are and where they would be most successful and most happy.

In conclusion, this study has helped validate the benefits of these practitioner-based projects. Students, practitioners, faculty, the college and its communities all derived benefits from improved connections broadly across their shared communities.

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TABLE 1	
Community-Based, Service Learning Organizations	
FOR PROFIT (17)	**Retail (13):**
	Automobile Dealerships (3)
	Bank
	Consulting
	Information Technology
	Insurance
	Newspaper
	Office products
	Real Estate
	Restaurants (3)
	Manufacturing (4):
	Construction
	Electornics
	Medical (2)
GOVERNMENT (4)	County (2)
	Municipal (2)
NON-PROFIT (20)	
Healthcare (8)	Hospitals (3)
	Nursing Homes (2)
	Agencies (3)
Education (5)	College (10 Administrative Departments)
	Disabilities School
	Museums (3)
Community (7)	Social Services (4)
	Sports/Wellness (2)
	Business Services

TABLE 2					
PROJECT TYPES					
N	%				
19	23%	Program assessment/Benchmarking			
17	21%	Human Resource Management			
14	17%	Marketing (includes Social Networking)			
10	12%	Program Development/Business Plans			
8	10%	Information Technology/Informatics			
4	5%	Fund Raising			
3	4%	Finance			
2	2%	Safety			
5	6%	Other			
N=82	100.0%				

TABLE 3			
STUDENT EVALUATIONS			
	Learned a lot in this course	Overall effective	
Spring 11	4.60	4.72	
Spring 11	4.73	4.92	
Fall 10	4.75	4.85	
Spring 10	4.68	4.58	
Spring 10	4.57	4.69	
Fall 09	4.17	4.32	
Spring09	4.00	4.09	
Spring09	4.43	4.47	
Fall 08	4.60	4.93	
Fall 08	4.50	4.69	
MEAN	4.50	4.63	
MEDIAN	4.59	4.69	
STUDENT COMMENTS RELATED TO			
	CLASS	PROJECTS	
	great class	everything we did had purpose	
	class was great	great job in teaching and opportunity to gain experience	
	good teacher-good class	Great experience	
	liked lot, learned lot	projects awesome	
	enjoyed class	gain hands-on experience	
	great class, good experience	learned so much	
	very good course, really enjoyed class	projects were great	
	one of favorite courses so far	very effective	
	good class	great idea	
	great class-never get rid of the class	real world experiences	
	interesting, enjoyable class	enjoyed site project, wish other classes [had such projects]	
	loved this class		

Table 4

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS: Total N = 167. Usable N = 163 (98%)

N	%	
147	90%	Development of functional skills (e.g., communication, assertiveness, problem solving)
136	83%	Positive attitude towards experiential programs (like project)
128	79%	Application of classroom knowledge
120	74%	Insight into your potential strengths and weaknesses
119	73%	Development of occupational skills (e.g., computer, time management)
116	71%	Better relationships with faculty members
116	71%	Enriched classroom learning
111	68%	Ability to work and learn independently
109	67%	Positive attitude towards community involvment/citizenship
109	67%	Improved self-confidence
109	67%	Sense of personal achievement
100	61%	Improved GPA
99	61%	Positive attitude toward academic studies/other classes
97	60%	Acquisition of specific academic skills and knowledge
92	56%	Positive attitude towards this college
92	56%	Sense of social responsibility
88	54%	Desire to stay at this college and complete degree
81	50%	Understanding social and cultureal differences
67	41%	Future course selection
60	37%	Ethical/moral development

TABLE 5

ROLE OF ORGANIZATION (4-point scale)

3.58	Helpfullness of Organizational Staff
3.35	Adequate orientation / training
3.40	Meaningful tasks to perform
3.63	Acceptance and support
3.50	Recognition for efforts

TABLE 6

CHOICE OF MAJOR	N	%
Confirmed	70	43%
Considerd Changing	7	4%
Changed	1	1%
No Effect	84	52%
	N=162	

TABLE 7		
VOLUNTEER WORK WAS		
Better than the Classroom	57	35%
Equal to the Classroom	93	58%
Worse than the Classroom	11	7%
	N=161	
TABLE 8		
STUDENT INCOPORATED LEARNING		
Very Well	46	29%
Better than Adequately	68	43%
Adequately	30	19%
Somewhat	15	14%
Not at all	1	1%
	N=160	
TABLE 9		
OVERALL RATING OF COURSE FORMAT		
Excellent	93	59%
Good	59	37%
Fair	6	4%
Poor	2	1%
	N=160	
TABLE 10		
SHOULD SERVICE LEARNING BE REQUIRED		
Yes - in the major	150	94%
No	10	6%
	N=160	