

JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Volume 6, Number 1

ISSN 2152-8411

Fall 2016

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**A REFEREED PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY
OF BUSINESS AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES**

JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

P.O. Box 502147, San Diego, CA 92150-2147: Tel 909-648-2120

Email: mondal@asbbs.org <http://www.asbbs.org>

ISSN 2152-8411

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The Journal of Business and Educational Leadership is a publication of the American Society of Business and Behavioral Sciences (ASBBS). Papers published in the Journal went through a blind-refereed review process prior to acceptance for publication. The editors would like to thank anonymous referees for their contributions.

The national annual meeting of ASBBS is held in Las Vegas in February/March of each year and the international meeting is held in summer/fall of each year. Visit www.asbbs.org for information regarding ASBBS.

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UNDERSTANDING BUSINESS CONCEPTS THROUGH APPLICATION: THE PEDAGOGY OF COMMUNITY- ENGAGED LEARNING

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Abstract: Business management is a set of skills that are developed and honed through experience. To develop these skills, educators use several different pedagogical tools to augment lectures in the classroom. These activities are meant to replicate real-life business situations to let students apply the theories they learned in class to solve business problems presented. This paper explores and analyzes community engaged learning as a teaching method to facilitate student learning and understanding of business concepts through application of the lessons learned in the classroom to address real problems in the community. The research intends to investigate how community engaged learning can foster experiential learning and also to identify critical elements that need to be considered when integrating community engaged learning into business courses.

Key Words: Community Engaged Learning, Curriculum Design, Business Courses

INTRODUCTION

Management is an applied field and it has been established that knowledge acquisition is best done by doing and learning. Business management is a skill that is developed and honed through experience and the key to understanding business concepts is through effective applications of theories in real-life situations. Community engaged learning (CEL) is a partnership between academic programs, students, faculty with community organizations (Community Engagement Collaborative, 2012) that aims to enhance student learning by engaging them in addressing key community issues. This mode of experiential learning can be integrated within many types of disciplines.

In recent years, CEL has slowly become an accepted pedagogy as more and more stakeholders in the society call for academic institutions to engage in the real world beyond the campus boundaries. At San Jose State University, community engaged learning as a teaching method is commonly used in the social sciences, education,

humanities, engineering and even health-related courses as seen in the programs offered (SJSU Community Engagement Programs/Projects, 2012). However, community engaged learning has yet to find a wider acceptance within the business courses. The purpose of this research is to create awareness for, and establish community engaged learning as an effective supplemental teaching method for understanding the application of business concepts and theories within the context of the community setting.

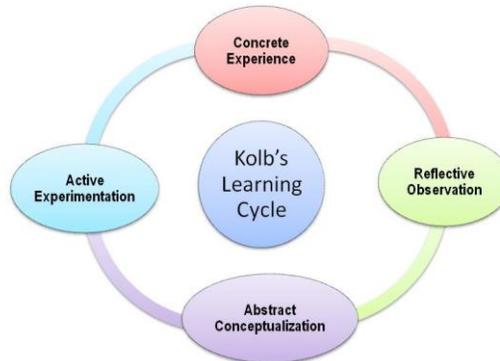
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Experiential learning activities are perceived to be educational and engaging. It provides an opportunity for students to get immersed within a given environment and directs the participants to “learn-by-doing”. There are several publications over the past decades asserting the effectiveness of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kenworthy-U’Ren, 2008; Harrison and Knight, 2015; Ritchie and McCorriston, 2015). and some of the most commonly cited advantages of this learning method include (Devasagayam et al, 2012; Clark, 2017):

- Helping students understand the value of teamwork
- Honing students’ strategic planning and critical thinking skills
- Aiding educators teach “real-life” analytical techniques
- Encouraging active learning and participation
- Helping students live and experience the theories and concepts that they learn in class

David Kolb’s (1984) theory on experiential learning suggests that effective learning takes place when the learner is able to complete a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Kolb's Learning Model (1984)



Business is one of the more popular fields of study in higher education. Past studies have highlighted the narrowness and the indifference of the business school curriculum to the external environment of business (Rishi, 2007) because the inordinate emphasis on learning and mastering business management theories and concepts at the expense of the practical application of these knowledge and skills. The result are groups of business graduates who do not have an idea on how to practically apply concepts they have learned while in school (Ayers, *et al.*, 2010). This presents a dilemma to business students, educators and administrators, as well as the employers of business graduates who are interested in hiring students that possess “analytical, problem-solving and evaluative skills” (Brzovic & Matz, 2009).

Community engaged Learning (CEL) is a form of experiential learning of which the practice can be traced back to several precursor activities including the “action research model” initially promoted by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s (Dallimore *et al.*, 2010) and the more recent practices of “participatory research” (Benson *et al.*, 2007). A comprehensive study spanning two decades discussed community engaged learning as a powerful pedagogical tool to enhance the common good (Zlotkowski & Duffy, 2010). In this same study, Zlotkowski and Duffy (2010) pointed out the increasing interest in this pedagogical method by highlighting the volumes of published academic resources related to CEL. Although community engaged learning seems to have been embraced in various fields, there is a gap in the literature in terms of integration into business courses. In fact, published articles suggest that the use of experiential learning, specifically CEL, in business education is still in the nascent stages (Brzovic & Matz, 2009; Hynes *et al.*, 2011; Devasagayam *et al.*, 2012), where business faculty have just begun to explore the possibilities of engaging their students with

the community. Hynes *et al.*, (2011) discussed the value of designing programs that would include CEL components within the business curriculum, and Devasagayam *et al.*, (2012) underscored the value of attaining “learning outcomes achieved through the use of innovative pedagogical techniques”, one of which is CEL.

In light of the gap in the literature concerning the application of CEL as a pedagogical method for understanding business concepts, this research aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) How does community engaged learning as a teaching method foster experiential learning in the business context?
- (2) What are the critical factors to consider making community engaged learning an effective pedagogy in business courses?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was gathered primarily through in-depth interviews and field observations. The main participants in the research were business students who have been involved in community engaged learning projects. Each student went through two sets of in-depth interviews, a pre-project interview and a post-project interview. The interviews lasted for about forty-five minutes per session. These two sets of interviews were necessary to conduct to find out the students’ perceptions of community engaged learning prior to their involvement in a CEL project and also to hear about their experiences after they have gone through the projects. Each student was asked to answer identical interview questions with some slight variations to account for the individual probing.

Field observations were conducted during the CEL orientation sessions to record student reactions to CEL based on the way the information is presented to them. Additional field observations were conducted to witness and analyze students in action during community activities. There were about 26 hours of field observations conducted for this research project. As soon as the field notes were transcribed, comments were appended onto the information to capture the thought process and initial analysis of the data.

RESULTS

It seemed like there are varying conceptions and understanding about CEL during the pre-project phase. Most of the participants are not really aware of what is community engaged learning and its purpose. This was evident in the answers to the question: “What is your understanding of the term community engaged learning?” during the pre-project phase. Most students equated community

engaged learning to community service or volunteering. Some indicated that this is the first time they heard about the term.

Students were interviewed after the project and results indicated a marked change in the students' understanding of CEL. Most students provided a greater understanding of the link between community engagement and learning. While some students indicated that this was their first experience in the community, all agreed that the experience was positive. Most students perceived CEL to be an effective tool to help them better understand the concepts learned in class. In terms of student workload and time commitments, all respondents indicated that there is a lot of either work or time needed to get involved in CEL.

During the in-depth interviews, many respondents raised some concerns on the workload and time commitment required to get engaged in a CEL project. It was interesting to note that some students are already doing some community work in the past and seem to like it. There are those who choose not to engage in community work because they feel that there are more important things to do than getting involved in the community. The results of the research pointed out to some changes in the students' attitudes towards CEL after they have participated in the program. Some indicated positive experiences and some not so. Overall, the dynamism of the CEL environment could be considered as a contributing factor to the development of the students' critical and analytical skills.

DISCUSSION

The following themes emerged from the research:

- (1) **Understanding the concept of CEL itself involves having the student immersed in the community experience.** Based on the student responses, there seemed to be a disconnection between the concepts of "community engaged" and "learning" from the students' own perspective. In general, students perceived CEL to be some sort of community service that they get involved in to "help" the community become a better place. As far as students are concerned, CEL is one-way process where they perform a service to the community, and they do not get anything in return. This predominant conceptual definition about CEL offers an explanation of why CEL is still in its nascent stages in business education and the scarcity of literature discussion this mode of learning. These misunderstandings about CEL could present problems when calling for student and faculty volunteers to work on CEL projects. Responses during the post-project interview indicate a trend towards a better understanding of the application of business concepts through involvement in a CEL project. It seems that students

developed an understanding about the pedagogical value of CEL only *after* they have been immersed in it. The CEL project in itself proved to be a powerful transformational tool and validates the two-decade comprehensive study conducted by Zlotkowski and Duffy (2010). For some students, they did not even expect that they would learn from the experience.

- (2) **Concern for time and work commitments.** Another emerging theme is the concern with the amount of time needed to get involved in the CEL program. This theme can be closely tied to understanding CEL. Some students who were not too clear about the purpose and the learning benefits of CEL might dismiss the project as a useless exercise that takes up too much time and involves a lot of work. Unless students understand the learning value of the CEL project, they are unlikely to be willing to devote the time to participate in it.

The concern for time commitments could be due to the demographic profile of the students at San Jose State University's College of Business. The university is known to be a commuter university where 86 per cent of the students live off-campus or commute to campus (SJSU Office of Institutional Research, 2012). Given these circumstances, students have a legitimate concern about balancing their time between work, school and family commitments. For most students, the main objective is to pass a course and move on the next course until they graduate. Hence, there is no point in getting involved in a CEL project that takes up more time, unless they see the value of the project in their learning.

- (3) **Attitudes toward community involvement as a determinant to learning.** One of the critical information that came out of the research is the role of the affective determinant in effective learning. This is true from the perspectives of both the faculty and the student (Rishi, 2007; Ritchie and McCorriston, 2015). During the field observations, there appeared to be a causal relationship manifested between the affective determinants and the level of learning. However, the results of the research do not establish either a positive or negative correlation between the two.
- (4) **Linking learning and doing through experiential learning.** A common factor gleaned from the interviews is the apparent preference for hands-on class activities in applying business concepts. Based on the initial responses of the students, the interactive hands-on activities conducted in class (e.g., case studies, role-playing and group class exercises) seem to be more effective in getting them to learn about

business concepts. This exhibits Kolb's learning model in action and affirms the theory that "effective learning" takes place when a learner is able go through the full cycle of learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The following section addresses these questions and examines how the results of the research contribute to the body of knowledge in these two areas:

Research Question 1: How does community engaged learning as a teaching method foster experiential learning in the business context? Understanding business concepts and knowing how to apply them have to go beyond lectures and discussions in the classroom. Based on the responses from the participants, there seems to be a preference for these types of experiential learning where students can immerse themselves in make-believe situations. Students tend to learn and understand the concepts better if they are able to apply it to a real-world setting. Immersion in a CEL project helps hone the students' strategic planning and critical thinking skills. Students have to figure out by themselves what is the best thing to do, given very specific situations. Students may have knowledge of certain business concepts, but unless they get to apply this in a real-life context, they find it difficult to make the connection between the business concept and the application. Without experiential learning, conceptual understanding is limited to the superficial definition of terms and abstract understandings of its application.

Another important learning point for students is learning how to work in teams. Based on the responses of the participants, CEL projects rarely allow students to work individually and this setup encourages students to work with their team mates, thus understanding and learning the value of teamwork. CEL is a good way to foster team work among students because out in an unfamiliar territory, students do not have any options but to rely on each other to work through the project. Continuing to teach through the conventional classroom method inhibits the possibility for students to learn from experience and apply the theories that they have learned. Engaging in a CEL project provides students with an immediate concrete experience that they can relate to and this could provide the basis for reflective learning. Examples of these skills include: ability to work in groups, communication and interpersonal skills, ability to solve problems and make decisions, among others.

Research Question 2: What are the critical factors to consider making community engaged learning an effective learning method in business courses?

There are several factors that need to be considered in making CEL an effective learning method in business courses.

First is the student and faculty preparation. Students need to have a clear cognitive understanding of CEL as a learning method from their perspective. The results of

the research indicated that most students have misconceptions about CEL and concerns about time commitments. These could easily lead to some resistance to the idea of participating in a CEL project. If students do not perceive the CEL project to be of value to their learning, they will treat this as a worthless exercise that is simply a waste of their time as stated several times by students. Likewise, business educators who do not understand the purpose of CEL are not able to appreciate its pedagogical value. It is critical that both the faculty and student understand the learning opportunity afforded by a CEL project before they get engaged. At times, it is effective to cite relevant employer statistics on what skills are necessary for students to get hired after graduation. Once students realize that involvement with the CEL project can hone their “employable” skills, and that this is something that they will directly gain out of investing their time in an experiential project, this could be a strong driver to get them engaged. On the part of the faculty, assessment of student outcomes should be conducted for them to recognize the pedagogical value of the CEL project.

Second is the design of the CEL project. Faculty should make sure that CEL projects are aligned with the course learning outcomes and content. A good alignment between the CEL project and the course material can serve as a form of support in that the students’ knowledge can provide a framework through which students can process and make sense of what they are experiencing while they are immersed in the CEL project. The course materials can provide insights that can help students construct new ways of learning. Careful thought has to be given to learning activities that would integrate conceptual and experiential learning. Otherwise, the students will not perceive the connection between what they are learning in class and what they need to apply in the community. This may not lead to an ineffective learning experience.

Third is the application of the right mix of relevant activities that can be realistically accomplished within a reasonable time frame and setting up the optimal mix of student teams. The CEL activities should provide the right type of challenge to the students, but at the same time consider the workload and time commitments needed to accomplish the tasks. Working with collaborative team members creates a support system that will enhance the learning experiences of the students. With this in mind, careful consideration of the composition of the group working on CEL projects has to be done by the faculty lead.

Fourth is the required reflective activities, exercises or opportunities that would enable the students to process their experiences. This could be in a form of a write-up, a reflective report or even a discussion with the faculty or with peers. Reflection on their experiences help the students develop an understanding of what they went through and what they learned from the experience (Schön, 1983).

CONCLUSION

Community Engaged Learning (CEL) provides opportunities for teachers to achieve their goals of educating students while meeting the needs of the real world, represented by the community. By engaging in a partnership with the community and designing learning activities that create alignments between the course learning outcomes and the community partners' needs, CEL could be an effective vehicle for reciprocal learning. The preliminary results of this research showed the effectiveness of CEL as a teaching method and the way it has created high-impact learning among the participants. There are four main following critical elements identified from the study that need to be considered in designing the CEL project for business courses: (1) Student and faculty preparation; (2) Design of the CEL project; (3) Application of the right mix of relevant activities; and (4) Provision of reflective activities or exercises.

A three-point structured approach is recommended to put the elements discussed in place:

- (1) Conduct CEL orientation sessions for both faculty and students and showcase successful CEL projects. The orientation sessions will help faculty and students understand the concept and purpose of CEL. Seeing actual CEL projects that worked and talking to the people who got involved will not only help dispel misconceptions about what a CEL project entails, but also stimulate the audience's interest in similar projects.
- (2) Identify appropriate CEL projects that match the learning outcomes of the course. Depending on the needs of the community, CEL projects offer different types of learning experiences. Faculty should select projects that will enable students to practice what they have learned in class. The learning activities should be designed in such a way that learning outcome of the course could be achieved.
- (3) Assessment of learning outcomes. At the end of the CEL projects, the faculty should assess student learning to determine if the CEL project was effective in helping students understand the business concepts through application in a community setting. This will help faculty evaluate the effectiveness of CEL as a pedagogical tool.

CEL can be a powerful pedagogical tool in understanding the application of business concepts. However, it would take some time for this teaching method to gain sufficient traction in business education unless some practices are in place to ease the adoption of this pedagogical model. Future research in this area can include the perspective of the business faculty in terms of adapting CEL in their courses.

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