EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, A COLLABORATIVE WAY TO EDUCATE UNDERGRADUATES IN THE REAL WORLD

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Abstract

Overview:

“We would have never thought about the business issue in this manner. This is fantastic; can we do it again next year?” This is the unscripted response we have received every time our undergraduate Management Information System (MIS) students have presented a solution for a technology issue to our corporate partners. A highly respected MIS department at a leading university in the United States wanted to engage undergraduate seniors with local corporate partners to create experiential learning opportunities. The department’s motivation was to facilitate real world MIS / IT opportunities that had yet to be analyzed by the corporation. What we expected was that the student teams would bring insight and suggestions from a completely different perspective. We have done this type of experiential learning projects now over a dozen times and the response has been the same every time from the corporate sponsors and participants, “Can we do it again?”

Results:

Our department has conducted sixteen of these capstone experiential learning projects during the past five years. The overwhelming feedback has been:

- We would have never looked at or come up with the suggestions the students have recommended. They have a completely different way of looking at business problems.
- The business school is now using the MIS department’s capstone class as a model for all other departments’ experiential learning initiatives.

Keywords: Corporate partners, experiential, real world cases, innovative solutions and ideas.

1 INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning is based on students being directly involved with learning rather than only being receivers of preformatted content (lectures, case studies, videos, etc.). Experiential learning is the kind of learning that Benjamin Franklin had in mind in the eighteenth century when he wrote, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I will learn.” Our MIS department, in conjunction with local corporate partners, has developed an undergraduate capstone course where our business partners provide real world MIS challenges and opportunities that our senior students, research, analyze, postulate, and then present recommendations.

1.1 Background

To create an experiential learning opportunity, a highly respected Management Information System (MIS) department at a leading university in a major US city wanted to engage soon to graduate students with local corporate partners. The number of local corporations actively recruiting MIS students out numbers the supply of talent. Several companies want to engage students in as many ways as possible. Students appreciate the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned in their major courses as opposed to analyzing written cases. The department’s motivation was to facilitate real world MIS / IT opportunities that had yet to be analyzed by the corporation. What we expected, and have found to be true, was that the student teams would bring insight from a completely different / youthful perspective. We have done this experiential learning several years and the response has been the same every time from the corporate sponsors and participants. “We would have never thought about the issue in that way. This is fantastic, can we do it again next year”.

Proceedings of EDULEARN17 Conference
3rd-5th July 2017, Barcelona, Spain

ISBN: 978-84-697-3777-4

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1.2 Motivation

“For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them. Men become builders by building.” – Aristotle [1]

- These experiential opportunities have all been real business scenarios that the corporate partner has not had the time or resources to address. All the companies would admit they suffer from group think. Providing fresh ideas from a student perspective to the issues has proven to be wildly successful. Experiential learning is based on students being directly involved rather than their being recipients of preformed content (i.e. lectures, videos, webcast, etc.) This kind of learning is what Benjamin Franklin has often been quoted as saying, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I will learn.” the quote came from Xun Kuang [2].

Psychologists John Dewey, Carl Rogers, and David Kolb have asserted that “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. [3]

Experiential learning has many definitions and models throughout higher education. Our MIS department, in conjunction with local corporate Fortune 500 partners, have developed an undergraduate Capstone Course where our business partners provide real world MIS challenges and opportunities that our students, research, analyze, postulate, recommend and present. These opportunities have all been actual business cases, but the organizations have not had the time or resources to address.

1.3 Problem Statement

- Give real world IT / MIS issues or opportunities to undergraduate students to analyze for companies looking for MIS millennial students to bring their perspective.
- Corporations describe the situation and reason or motivation for pursuing the topic.
- The big challenge for the students is dealing with ambiguity.
- Students have had to apply their educational background using financial, accounting, marketing, merger and acquisition skills as well as MIS skills to analyze and make final recommendations.

2 METHODOLOGY

MIS departments in corporations are constantly being asked by their functional counterparts to investigate potential technical projects. One recent project was developing a process for an organization to determine what applications are best fit to be hosted in the cloud or on premise. Quite often these projects involve new technology which the organization may or may not have experience with or they also do not have enough staff to study the project in a timely manner.

Corporate Partner

- Project sponsors prepare a brief, one page description of the business case.
- Corporate partners prepare brief description, identify key contacts and subject matter experts, and methods of communication (email, GoogleDocs, Skype, etc).
- Corporations host the project kick-off meetings for students to meet the customer, be introduced to the company, hear about the project, ask questions and meet key contacts and subject matter experts.

2.1 Administration

The class is a half semester course, only seven weeks, with approximately 50 students.

- Two corporate projects are used in each class, with number of students equally split between the partners.
- Students are asked to form teams of four before the class begins.
- First day of class teams are assigned to a project.
- Before the kick-off meetings the projects are discussed and students taught how to conduct interviews.
- During the second and third class sessions students visit corporate for a kick-off meeting.
Students demonstrate project management skills by preparing the scope document, work breakdown structure, project plan, and responsibility and communications matrix.

Students meet with instructor weekly for questions and guidance. The instructor ensures completion of tasks according to the schedule as laid out in the student generated and corporate approved project plan.

Student teams create a “Big Deck” which is power point containing all their documentation of their research, analysis, recommendations, and appendix. These Big Decks average between 70 – 80 slides.

A half day of final presentations is scheduled at the corporate partner’s facility. Each team is scheduled for a twenty-minute presentation and ten minutes for questions.

The teams prepare a Presentation Deck, approximately 20 slides, which is also printed and handed out to corporate judges.

The corporations provide between five to eight judges, who score each team on a rubric provided.

Judges scoring makes up 60% of the student’s final grade.

3 RESULTS

Our department has conducted sixteen of these capstone experiential learning projects during the past five years. The overwhelming feedback:

- We would have never looked at or come up with the suggestions the students have recommended. They have a completely different way of looking at business problems.
- At the beginning of the project, the students struggle with ambiguity.
- Students need to apply project management techniques along with their research skills to find solutions to current business issues.
- A surprisingly small number of team recommendations are similar. The range of suggestions is one of the most interesting outcomes for the corporate partners.
- The teams do a surprising amount of research both in variety and depth. There have been multiple presentations where a judge has stopped a student and asked “Where did you find that?”
- Partners generally have six teams of four students assigned to their project. Each team typically generates four recommendations, and a future state or stretch suggestion. Approximately half of the suggestions were dismissed (the students did not understand the corporation, environment, duplicate, etc.). The other half were outstanding.
- Corporate partners are left with at least ten unexpected excellent recommendations, some of which are almost always acted upon.
- Almost all the corporate partners take all the team presentations and combine them into one and presentation that they show their leadership.
- Student feedback, “Best class they have ever taken, completely different than classroom lectures, cases, writing papers and exams.”
- The business school is now using the MIS department’s capstone course as a model for all other departments’ experiential learning initiatives.
- All the companies who have participated have all repeated and asked to do it again.

3.1 Lessons learned

- The course organization is explained to the students as a consulting engagement. 1. Corporate partner – customer, 2. Instructor – Consulting Partner, 3. Students - consultants
- We encourage students to form their own teams. Familiarity with team members is a good way to avoid future issues.
Partners need to allow for a significant time investment on a weekly basis, especially in the early phase.

Corporate partners need to determine how they want to communicate with the teams. Teams and partners have used about every method; the best, if possible, seems to be face to face meetings.

The best results are achieved when the teams are held to deadlines and deliverables but the content and direction are completely their own. We tell the teams that the partners want your research and recommendations, not the instructor’s.

4 CONCLUSIONS
Success for us in this course is determined by having partners asking, “when can we do this again” and students stating “best course they have ever taken”. Our capstone course starts with a picture of a triangle. The sides are labelled, Students, Corporate Partners, MIS Dept. The message, is that we are all interconnected. Students dealing with real business issues; projects provided from corporations interested in the students’ findings; and a university department educating students who demonstrate their abilities to our local corporate partners. A win, win, win for all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Participating Companies: 3M, General Mills, Medtronic, United Health Group, Optum, Redpath, University of Minnesota Office of Technology, and Patty Olson

REFERENCES