

Inquiry based Service-Learning and Business Education: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning is an increasingly popular pedagogy designed to enrich academic learning with community service work. In the service-learning courses, generally, the students get opportunity to apply the acquired knowledge into real life situations through the community service projects. In this study, the authors argue that the service-learning pedagogy not only gives students the opportunities for knowledge application, but it can also provide students hands-on experiences in discovering new knowledge and deliver the professional consulting services. The authors use the case study research to explore effective use of inquiry based service-learning approach for business management courses, and how it can drive desired learning outcomes. The findings of this study provide important insights about how to effectively integrate inquiry based instruction with the service-learning pedagogy in the context of business education.

Keywords: Service-learning, action research, problem-based learning, business education

1. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have criticized the business education for its narrowness. The business education is also criticized for providing simplistic prescriptions for complex problems, and for inability to instill sense of morality and humanistic values. To partially address these inherent problems of business education, the use of experiential techniques like Academic Service Learning (ASL) has recently become more prevalent (Godfrey, Illes and Berry, 2005). ASL pedagogy is designed to enrich academic learning with community service work.

Important benefit of this pedagogy is that the students get opportunity to apply the newly acquired knowledge and skills into real life situations through the community service projects. These community service projects are important for instilling humanistic and ethical values in the business students. These projects also provide the business students an arena to face the real world complexities in more secured classroom environment.

Despite all the benefits, the adoption of the ASL pedagogy is not completely hurdle free. The community service initiatives do not always appear to complement business learning outcomes and that presents a major hurdle for the adopting ASL pedagogy for business education. While ASL enthusiasts are seeking innovative ways to align the community service initiatives with academic learning outcomes, the existing ASL literature still focuses on the issues of its relevance and impact (Eyler, 2000; Giles and Eyler, 1998). And, at this time, more research is needed to describe innovative processes of ASL pedagogy that facilitate the discipline specific learning outcomes (Eyler, 2000). To fill this gap, in this research, the authors describe processes of creatively blending inquiry based learning approaches with ASL pedagogy to facilitate the learning outcomes of business courses.

A special type of inquiry based learning is the problem based learning approach. This approach initiates and enriches students' learning by creating a need to solve an authentic real-life problem in its own present context. Instead of requiring students to first study the context-free content knowledge in the classroom that they may or may not have the real-life application,

the problem based learning embeds students' learning processes in the real-life problems. During the problem-solving process, students construct content knowledge and develop problem-solving skills. In this study, the authors argue that the ASL pedagogy not only gives students the opportunities for knowledge application, but it can also provide the students with a range of very meaningful real life problems to solve. These real life problems of community partners provide rationalization and reasons for studying that particular course, and, provide the students hands-on experiences in discovering and co-creating new knowledge. In addition, this kind of pro-bono research and consulting conducted by students enrich their academic learning, enhance their professionalism, teamwork, and problem solving, time-management and presentation skills; at the same time these activities also help solve the real problems of the community partners, who generally do not have financial resources to hire external consultants.

The paper begins by building a conceptual foundation through reviewing relevant literature in the field, and constructs basic propositions. Next, the authors describe the case study methodology to explore the propositions further in terms of understanding how the inquiry/problem based service-learning approach in business management courses leads desired learning and research outcomes.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

In general, business schools are expected to inform business practices by educating students to become the ethical and competent managers/leaders, by creating relevant and applicable knowledge in the form of research, and by disseminating and communicating this knowledge to practice in the form of consulting. Recently, T. Grandon Gill (2010) conducted a very detailed critical analysis of the impact of

academic activities of a business school and presented evidence that business schools today face a real "crisis of informing" (T. Grandon Gill, 2010, p. 1). He quoted a very interesting comment from AACSB report (2008) preface, "It is not easy to fix something when people cannot agree it is broken", and added to the comment that "it is not easy to tell something is broken if the people you ask are the ones who broke it". Hence, now, instead of denying the informing problems, it is very crucial to embrace, explore, diagnose and fix them.

Some scholars have questioned the significant positive impact of business education in terms of relevant learning gains. According to them, business education has narrow focus (Godfrey, Illes and Berry, 2005), promotes blinding obsession with facts, and emphasizes analytical detachment and methodological elegance over rich applicable knowledge and insight that is rooted in experience (Hayes and Abernathy, 1980). That's how instead of holistic understanding, it provides simplistic prescriptions for complex real life problems. In addition, the grounded supremacy of shareholder wealth, it is sometimes unable to instill moral awareness and humanistic values. Based on their collective experience, Godfrey, Illes and Berry, (2005) suggested that the service-learning pedagogy presents a needed counterpoint to the many of the above mentioned issues of business education. According to them, there are four Rs of service-learning: Reality, Reflection, Reciprocity, and Responsibility, and, each R yield a broader educational and experience base for students. Service-learning pedagogy enhances ethical awareness and is touted to bridge the divide and disconnect between academic learning and real world (McCarthy, 2002). Hence, the service-learning pedagogy help the business educators partially address the 'crisis of informing'.

Despite addressing many important issues, the general teacher-centered service-learning

approaches, in which the student acquire knowledge in the classroom and then learn to apply it in the context of community service projects, are not explicitly fixing more perennial issues of business education raised by T. Grandon Gill (2010) like: Can the knowledge creation (research) and knowledge dissemination (education and problem solving) be really separated?, Are the students gaining skills that matters the most for the effective practice? Is the research relevant for practice? Are the business schools and students well connected within community and concerned for solving the problems? -- etc. The teacher-centered services-learning, at best, can enhance learning outcomes; however, they don't explicitly make the research and consulting more relevant, where problem/inquiry based service-learning and action research can be very useful. The evidence in the critiques of business education may signal what is not working but do not yet provide guidance to what might work more effectively (Coombs and Elden, 2004). We explore what might work, and propose that the right blending of inquiry/problem based approaches with service-learning pedagogy facilitates educators inform the practice more effectively by having higher research, learning and consulting impacts.

2. METHOD

We have used the inquiry-based service-learning approach in teaching 4-credit undergraduate courses at Berkeley College, New York. And, we aim describes the inquiry based service-learning approach and explores how this approach can inform practice more effectively, and what factors influence the effectiveness of this approach. We use case study research to explore the contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context. For exploring the impact of course level on the instructional approach and its impact, we are comparing two different level inquiry-based ASL courses: a 200-level course: Not-for-Profit Management

and a 400-level course: Managing for Change. For our data collection, we used multiple sources such as Student Instructional Reviews, students' ASL feedback interviews, reflection papers, online discussions, student research reports and student presentations, and the community partners' feedback.

3. CASE STUDY CONTEXT

In 2010, March of Dimes needed to study the feasibility of using celebrities to strengthen their fund-raising and public relations for their organization. Consequently, they needed a research to understand issues such as benefits and challenges of working with celebrity talent; which non-profit organizations (NPOs) are using celebrities for similar objectives; types of agreements these NPOs have with celebrities; how NPOs are using these celebrities on their websites; how such celebrities were publicizing their own engagement with NPOs; role of talent agents and Public Relation firms in placement of their clients in NPOs. They also needed consulting services for identification of potential celebrity leads; and for preparing a marketing pitch that the March of Dimes could use to persuade celebrities to work pro-bono with them. Dr. Bedi worked in close collaboration with the March of Dimes to understand their problems, designed the student project, and adapted his 400-level course: Managing for Change to ensure that this project satisfied NPO's requirements, at the same time, enriched the course's learning outcomes. Past research on problem-based approach suggested that it is more likely to succeed when the students have higher levels of skills and knowledge, and, therefore, we first tried this approach with the 400-level course. The course was a very successful experience in terms of the overall course impact: impact on student learning, impact on student satisfaction and skills, impact on the delivered research's quality and consulting services, and the community partners' satisfaction as well.

Next time, in 2012, when March of Dimes approached us with their requirements, we decided to replicate the approach for a 200-level course. This time, March of Dimes needed to study ways of engaging the corporate partners for gaining relevant pro-bono services. Consequently, they needed a research to understand issues such as how and why corporations partner with non-profits; how they conduct professional pro-bono service; how other NPOs engage their corporate partners. They also needed consulting services for identifying diverse corporate leads, and ways of approaching them. This time, Dr. Desai worked with the March of Dimes to understand their problems, designed her 200-level course: Not-for-profit Management accordingly. This course also has been a very successful experience in terms of overall course impact.

Unlike, the problem based approaches, in which either students search for their own problems or instructors provide the students with a fuzzy problem, we invite the community partners as guest speakers to discuss their problems. In the first week of the course, community partner/s discusses how they need students' research, knowledge creation, and consulting services and what are their expectations. In the first two weeks, instructor and community partners agree on deliverables and their respective roles and responsibilities. Then the instructor decides the right amount of interventions and interactions with the community partners depending on the student skill levels. At the end of the course, the community partners assessed the student's research and consulting services after a formal presentation

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The case analysis was conducted in two steps: descriptive and interpretive. First step of the process was the systematic description and reconstruction of the different type of qualitative data. Next step was to code the categories of data and pattern matching. Overall the findings

about how the inquiry based service-learning pedagogy facilitates educators inform the practice more effectively are summarized in a theoretical framework presented in figure-1.

Role of Educators Actions and Interventions'

In both the courses, in addition to designing right course content and delivery methods, the educator played a central role in connecting and engaging the students and community partner in the meaningful problem defining and problem solving process.

Educator-Community Partner Interactions

In the early phases of both the courses, the educator-community partner interactions have found to be very valuable for building an engaging problem for students. In this phase, the right problems were matched with the right courses; instructors and the community partners found congruence in the courses' required outcomes and community partners' needs, and, both made some adjustments to define common objectives. These interactions are also important for leading community partners' efforts, initiatives and engagement in the process.

Community Partner Role

Higher community partner efforts, engagement and initiatives made the impact of deliverable research and consulting services more significant. Inspirations, expectations and requirements specifications from the community partners played a crucial role in engaging students irrespective of the course level.

Students' Role

Despite the high level of engagement in both the courses, in 400-level course, students have played more independent role. They identified individual interests/ passions and formed groups accordingly; selected team leaders; developed reporting relationships; divided responsibilities. On the contrary, in 200-level course, they

identified their interests, passions, and picked the right cases they wanted to study further, however, for group formation and responsibility division, the instructor intervention was required.

Instructor-Student Interactions

In both the courses, meaningful problem combined with insightful instructor-student interactions have been a key reason for increased student engagement and efforts and learning. In both the courses, on-going instructor-student interactions were important for reviewing current state of knowledge, executing plans for research, and making sure that implementation is on schedule, monitoring and feedback. Both the courses used regular progress reporting, discussions, in-class group work, and brainstorming/in-class problem-solving sessions as a method of class delivery. 200-level course needed more step by step assistance in solving problem in the early phases; while 400-level course needed more constructive feedback. These instructor-student interactions played the most important role in enhancing learning impact.

Educator-Student-Community Partner Interactions

In both the cases, educator, student and community partner interactions were crucial for designing action plan, periodic feedback on the progress and final presentation of deliverables. Lower level courses needed more feedback. These interactions plays very important role in creating higher research and consulting impact.

5. CONCLUSION

The Results of this study provide important insights into ways to effectively integrate inquiry based instruction with the service learning pedagogy. This approach can be

equally useful for other professional disciplines like design, art, engineering, science, and information systems. The world is full of meaningful problems to solve, and there are a lot of pro-bono and open source projects that requires our attention, and will make learning more meaningful and our education more impactful.

6. REFERENCES

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Figure-1 Theoretical Framework

