ENHANCING STUDENT LEARNING: USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN AN INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS COURSE

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ABSTRACT

It has been asserted by many university faculty who rely on traditional pedagogies, that all learning is active, yet contemporary studies have suggested that the passive role of students is increasingly ineffective and outdated [12]. Active learning is advocated to involve students "doing things and thinking about what they are doing" [8].

Faculty teaching a newly designed introduction to business course were encouraged to adopt active learning techniques to enhance the learning experience of students. Various methods of experiential learning were subsequently used in individual classes: simulation games, case studies, team company-based projects, writing assignments, in-class discussion, demonstrations and other in-class student activities. 184 students who had completed the course in the past five academic years were completed a survey designed to address the research question: "Do different pedagogical approaches have different learning outcomes in an introduction to business course?"

INTRODUCTION

Research of pedagogical techniques has been controversial and inconclusive about the best methods for teaching; opinions and research range from a pure lecture format to one that is solely experientially based. Traditional students (age 17 to 25) have been characterized as consumers rather than co-producers of knowledge [15], suggesting that the lecture format is preferable because students "consume the knowledge" as presented in the classroom. It is asserted that all learning is active, and thereby students are actively involved while listening to formal presentations in the classroom [8].

Research has also indicated that many individuals have learning styles better served by pedagogical methods that allow students to have a direct experience with the material rather than by lecture. Bacon [2] established a link between learning styles and outcomes. It has been suggested that experiential learning is more important for higher-order tasks: analysis, synthesis and evaluation [8]. Borzak and Hursch [4] demonstrated that experiential learning may foster qualities of learning traditionally lacking in classroom programs, introducing the concepts of "decentering" and "reciprocity." Experiential learning is described in the literature as including demonstrations [3], case studies [14] [5] [7] [17], team-based projects [1] [[13][16], in-class exercises [5], discussions [11], simulations [9] [17] [6], etc. Others suggest a hybrid approach engaging both philosophies: traditional and experiential [4].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Seven hypotheses were developed to address the research question. The first four hypotheses addressed the perceived value of the course and the course's influence on the student's decision to major in business.

H1: The value placed on the introduction to business course increased with time in the business program.
H2: Completing the introduction to business course encouraged students to major in business.
H3: Course methodology influenced a decision to declare a business major.
H4: Attainment of course objectives influenced value rating of course.
H5: Experiential learning techniques were valued higher than non-experiential teaching techniques.
H6: Value of course increased with the degree of experiential techniques.
H7: There is no value difference among experiential techniques used.

A survey was administered to students who had completed the introduction to business (Value Creation in the Global Environment) course, redesigned five years earlier to incorporate specific learning objectives. One hundred eighty-four students completed the survey, of which 53% were male. One hundred sixty-two of the respondents were declared business majors, and this had been the first business course taken in the School of Business curriculum for one hundred fifty four (84%) of the students surveyed.

Eighty-six respondents (47%) reported that lecture was the primary instructional methodology used. Respondents also indicated the use of various active or experiential learning pedagogies. Eighty-four students (46%) indicated that the class had been based primarily on discussion, while another eighty-four (46%) said that the class was simulation project based. Eighty-two (45%) of students said that a class (team-based) project was used.

Data, analyzed using standard Student's T parametric tests and ANOVA, indicated that the student's valued the course and would recommend it to others, although the course did not influence their decisions to major in business. The final three hypotheses, which are the critical hypotheses in this study, are discussed in more detail below:

H1: The value placed on the introduction to business class increases with time in the business program. Two questions were used to address this hypothesis: "Do you feel this course adequately prepared you for subsequent business courses" and "Would you recommend this course to other students" A value of "1" indicated " not at all," while "5" indicated "extremely well."

Both means (3.42 and 3.57 respectively) were statistically significant based on the results of a one-sample t-Test. However when responses by year groups were compared (using ANOVA) for the question "Do you feel this course adequately prepared you for subsequent business courses," a significant difference was found in the responses of the 2000 year group, compared with those of the 2001through 2004 year groups. On the basis of these results, the hypothesis cannot be rejected.

H2: Completing the introduction to business course encourages students to major in business. Students were asked "Did (Value Creation in Global Environment course) influence your decision to major in business." A response of "1" indicated "not at all," while a 5 indicated "extensively." The mean response for all students (2.38) indicated that the course did not influence their decision, a one-sample test resulting in a statistically significant finding (t Value of -6.34). No differences were found when data was compared by year group. On the basis of this finding the hypothesis is rejected, and a result Hypothesis 3 (course methodology in the introduction to business class influences a decision to declare a business major) was not tested.

H4: Attainment of course objectives influences value rating of course.
Students were asked to assess to what degree the course, as experienced, met five prescribed course learning objectives. Assessment of the degree to which objectives were met was based on scaled responses (1 being "not at all" and "5" being "extremely well). Aggregate student responses affirmed (by one-sample t-Test) that the course objectives had been met, irrespective of the pedagogical format used. On the basis of these findings the hypothesis cannot be rejected.

H5: Experiential learning techniques are valued higher than non-experiential teaching techniques.
Students were asked to rank pedagogical tools used, both traditional classroom lecture and experiential techniques. The mean values and associated one-sample test results indicate that in-class discussion (t-Value 8.12) and lecture (t-Value 7.25) were most highly valued; team projects (t-Value 4.69) and simulations (t-Value 3.95) were also valued. No statistical differences were identified when the data were analyzed based on gender or by class year group. On the basis of these findings (one sample t-Test results of pedagogical methods and paired t-Tests of alternative methods) the hypothesis is rejected.

H6: Value of the introduction to business course increases with the degree of experiential techniques.
ANOVA was used to test the hypothesis, with the student's assessment of the value of the course as preparation for other business courses being the dependent variable. The findings for use of experiential company-based projects, Wall Street Journal readings for in-class discussion, case studies, writing assignments, and in-class discussion methods indicated statistically significant differences, supporting the value of the course increased with the degree of use. However there were no significant differences for use of simulations and other projects. On the basis of these findings, the hypothesis cannot be rejected.

H7: There is no value difference among experiential techniques used.
Students perception of value were compared for each experiential technique using paired t-Tests. 22 significant differences among the 29 pairs of experiential methods were found indicating that students perceived significant value differences in the different experiential methods used. On the basis of this finding, the hypothesis is rejected.

FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The data did not support the rejection of three hypotheses (H1, H4 and H6). Analysis supported rejection of H2, indicating that the redesigned course was not a motivating factor in their decision to pursue a business major; the majority of respondents appeared to have already made their decision. It was also hypothesized (H5) that a higher value would be placed on experiential learning than for traditional methods, e, g., lecture; this was not supported by the data. Such a finding appears contrary to that prevailing in literature associated with the two pedagogical philosophies. However the results may support earlier research [3] suggesting a balanced use of both didactic and experiential methods. The finding that students did not (statistically) value use of case studies also calls to mind the assertion that using case studies requires special capabilities and effort by faculty [14]. This finding may suggest the need for improved efforts by those faculty using case studies in this formative course. Finally, the data supported rejection of the hypothesis (H7) that there were no differences in the student value perceptions of experiential methods used.

This study, as other earlier research, lacked a rigorous basis for testing the efficacy of experiential methods in a university course, assessment having being confined to a surrogate measure "prepare," i.e., the degree to which students considered the course to have prepared them for subsequent business

courses (and to a lesser degree on another surrogate, "recommend"). Although other authors question whether such "rigorous" assessment is achievable [9] [10], the basic need for reasonably assessing outcomes argues for more research.

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