

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH IN THE CURRICULUM: A CASE EXAMPLE OF ACTION LEARNING IN MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

This study introduces the concept of collaborative research as a distinct form of the more general undergraduate research model and as a reflection of an underlying premise of action learning. The importance of collaborative research is that it treats students and faculty as partners in the research process. Because the student works more closely with the faculty member, student learning is enhanced and knowledge transfer becomes more effective. Unfortunately, such effectiveness comes at the expense of efficiency. Nonetheless, we contend that collaborative research can produce a net benefit for the student, faculty, and educational institution.

[comment cards, collaborative research, action learning]

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the single most common method of transferring knowledge to students is through the lecture method. A primary advantage of this method is that it is highly efficient; in essence, it is amenable to a relatively high student/faculty ratio. An additional method that serves to increase the effectiveness of knowledge transfer is subsumed under the concept of *action learning*. Broadly defined, action learning is “a means of development; intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change to improve his observable behavior henceforth in the problem field.” [14, P. 5]

Among the various types of activities that fall under the umbrella of action learning are internships [1], practicum [13], cooperative education [5], field consulting studies [10], class projects [4], service learning [7], and undergraduate research experiences [8], [11]. Of these, undergraduate research experiences are perhaps the least common in business schools today but holds significant promise for the future [3].

As background, note that the *Council on Undergraduate Research* states that the purpose of a curricular undergraduate research program is to: “support and promote high-quality undergraduate student-faculty *collaborative* research and scholarship” (<http://www.cur.org/about.html>). The term *collaborative* is italicized to highlight and distinguish undergraduate research that is conducted primarily by the student from research that is jointly produced as a result of collaboration between the student *and* the faculty mentor.

Unfortunately, collaborative research tends to be less efficient than other methods because it is more labor intensive because the mentor takes a more active role in the completion of the project. In return for this effort, numerous benefits arise for both the student and the mentor. Primary among these is the increased potential for publication in a scholarly or professional forum. In this way, the contribution is

more likely to attain a higher standard of achievement than might otherwise be the case. Such a *bona fide* also helps serve to increase a student's confidence and enhance his/her opportunities in graduate school and/or chosen career. To date, however, collaborative research in business schools has not been widely discussed in the literature [see 3 for a review]. The purpose of this essay is to further this discussion by presenting a case example of a project that was conducted in marketing.

CASE ANALYSIS: THE QUALITY OF CUSTOMER COMMENT CARDS

Collaborative Research Approach

The collaborative research program at the sponsoring institution utilizes uses a *folder approach* to project development. The folder approach identifies projects beforehand and allows students to select one from the "folder". We have usually found this to be more efficient than asking students to identify project ideas on their own. In the latter case, it often results in lost time as students grapple with the challenge of finding a doable and meaningful project. Nonetheless, it is important for students to develop an ability to identify meaningful projects. As such, we typically recommend that entry-level student researchers begin their research using the folder approach and, after completing a project or two, they are provided the opportunity to identify a project (or project area) on their own.

By case example, the research design for the current study was grounded in an earlier study that examined the quality of guest comment cards used by major hotel chains [2]. The authors of that study noted that additional research was needed to determine if the quality (and lack thereof) of hotel comment cards differed significantly from those used by other retail establishments. Hence, they built upon prior research by the guidelines to a more cross-sectional sample.

Developing the research team was straightforward. Through this vetting process at central administration, research candidates are selected and awarded the title of "University Research Fellow" (URF). As a condition for this award, students are expected to engage in research that makes a contribution to the common body of knowledge. In this way, we were able to recruit a suitable first-year URF that expressed an interest in the comment card project.

To help acquaint the student with the project, she was first provided with the relevant literature on comment cards. This included research that not only discussed the design and administration of comment cards, but the usefulness of the resulting data. After reviewing the literature, the faculty mentor and student met to discuss the nature of prior research and how it helped define the current study. In this manner, the student learned how current research builds upon prior research.

From here, the formal research design was developed. Through this process, the student learned that research designs are systematic and that many of the elements are drawn from previous work in the area. For example, the student found that we did not need to develop new guidelines for evaluating comments cards as they had already been established and reported in a prior study.

In the data collection stage, both the faculty mentor and the student collected comment cards from a convenience sample of retailers. At the same time, a coding form was developing reflecting the guidelines for comment card evaluation proposed by Bartkus et al. [3]. The cards were evaluated independently by both the faculty mentor and the student. In this way, the student was introduced to the concept of inter-rater reliability.

A preliminary report and poster illustration of the project was then prepared for the student to present at an undergraduate research forum. Shortly thereafter, the student changed majors (not uncommon for first-year students) and transferred out of the college. This meant that the completion of the project would be left to the faculty mentor or that a new collaboration would need to be formed.

Since it was the beginning of a new academic year, we were able to recruit another URF who expressed interest in the project. The new URF was introduced to the process in much the same way as the

previous student and was also involved in extending the data collection and helping to prepare a more formal report.

Because this essay reports on a case analysis, we limit some of the details of the study and only provide a summary report. In the following sections, we present a brief literature review outlining the logic for the study followed by a description of the method used and the results. We conclude with a discussion of the collaborative research experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Developing appropriate methods of data collection is essential to obtaining valid data [9]. The use of customer comment cards is one method that has been both praised and criticized. It has been praised for its ability to obtain customer feedback in a timely manner and as a “tactical information tool for immediate problem solving and for monitoring service delivery quality” [12, P. 17]. Conversely, it has also been criticized because of poor design quality [2], [6], [15], [16].

Evidence of poor design quality remains tentative as prior research has been based on small samples, samples restricted to a single industry, and/or the use of inappropriate guidelines for analysis. For example, Steintrager [15] and Wisner and Corney [16] used relatively small samples. Bartkus et. al [2] restricted the analysis to lodging establishments. Finally, Gilbert and Horsnell [6] applied guidelines better suited for formal surveys than comment cards.

If we are to better understand the quality of comment cards, the limitations of prior research should be addressed using an appropriate-sized, cross-sectional sample, and guidelines that are directly relevant to the design of comment cards.

METHOD

Content analytic procedures were used to evaluate a convenience sample of 45 retailers located throughout the United States. The sample includes department stores, specialty retailers, supermarkets, hotels and motels, gas stations, restaurants, discount stores, and hospitals. The guidelines were adapted from Bartkus et al. [2] and include the following:

Guideline 1: Comment cards should have a *secure return method* and a *statement of confidentiality*.

Guideline 2: The card should provide an opportunity for guests to provide *contact information*.

Guideline 3: The *number of questions should be moderate*.

Guideline 4: There should be *sufficient writing space for open-ended comments*.

Guideline 5: Response categories for closed-ended questions *should be balanced*.

Guideline 6: There should be an *adequate number of response categories*.

Guideline 7: Question wording should *conform to generally accepted principles*.

RESULTS

The results are generally consistent with the findings of Bartkus, et al. [2]. In total, card design and implementation was deficient in many respects. The following summarizes the major findings.

Guideline 1: Return Mechanism and Statement of Confidentiality

- 32 percent *did not* have a secure return mechanism (e.g., no locked drop box or mail option). Ninety percent *did not* provide statement of confidentiality.

Guideline 2: Contact Information and Offer to Respond

- 62 percent of the cards *did not* request an email address.
- 77 percent of the cards *did not* offer to respond to the customer’s comments.

Guideline 3: Number of Questions

- 90 percent of the cards were within the recommended limit of 10 closed-end questions.

Guideline 4: Space for Open-Ended Questions

- 37 percent of the cards had less than the proposed minimum writing space (i.e., 21 total inches).

Guideline 5: Balanced Response Categories

- 64 percent of the cards used response categories that were unbalanced. All were unbalanced in a direction that favored a positive response.

Guideline 6: Adequate Number of Response Categories

- 61 percent of the cards had too few response categories (i.e., less than 5).

Guideline 7: Question Wording

- 28 percent of the cards contained at least one question wording error. The most common was a double question. This compares with 68.8 percent in the BHHP study with double question also the most common.

DISCUSSION

This essay has argued for the use of collaborative research in the curriculum as an effective means of supplementing other important learning methods. A major advantage of the collaborative research approach is that it allows students to develop skills that might be more difficult to obtain through traditional coursework or other forms of learning. With regard to student involvement, each of the students said that the process allowed them gain a better understanding of, and appreciation for, the research process; that virtually all research follows the same basic format of problem identification, research design, testing and reporting.

Despite the advantages, collaborative research does have limitations. Foremost among these is the time commitment on the part of the faculty mentor. An additional limitation is the fact that research often takes more than a single semester to complete and students sometimes change majors (or universities) between semesters resulting in a project that is only partially complete. This happened in the current case and, because it was the end of the spring semester, we had to decide to whether or not to complete the project without additional collaboration or wait until the beginning of the fall semester when an incoming student researcher would become available. In the end, we waited until fall.

With regard to the current study, the students were exposed to the challenges that often arise in research. For example, in reviewing card content, they found that some of the cards were not traditional comment cards, but were more appropriately labeled as “compliment cards”. As such, we decided that they would not be part of this study.

Finally, some of the “cards” were not cards at all, but simply pieces of paper, oftentimes blank. In other cases, they were simply photo-copied pieces of paper that asked for comments. In a few cases, the “card” was a full 8.5 by 11 inch sheet of paper. All of these so-called comment cards were omitted from the study and will be included in a later analysis.

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