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THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

A Model for Experiential Learning and Community Engagement in Marketing Research

Maria M. Ryan, Gary Marchioro

Abstract — This paper outlines a model developed in a partnership between a university business school and a state government education department. The model is based on an environment of experiential learning within a marketing research unit for university students and provides market information for primary and secondary school principals to facilitate the development of their school marketing plans. The paper also discusses the development of expertise in the researching of local educational needs, by a community's education sector, with a view to establishing long term, mutually beneficial relationships.

Index Terms — Community networks, Experiential learning, Marketing research, Education partnerships.

1 Introduction

This paper discusses the process of developing a model for education providers to facilitate a mutually beneficial partnership within a local community. In this instance, the partnership realised potential benefits for all stakeholders including students (primary, secondary and tertiary), parents, teachers, lecturers, principals, and the community at large. The process is based on an environment offering experiential learning opportunities for postgraduate or undergraduate university students within a university's school of business marketing research unit/s. In addition, the process also involves the subsequent provision of market information for primary and secondary school principals to assist in the development of school based marketing plans.

School-university partnerships have long been recognised as an important strategy to the planning process. However, the term *partnership has* been defined across a range of meanings and levels of relationships [1]. In this case, the partnership was developed for a specific function and benefited from a dedicated professional relationship between key staff from each partner relationship. A shared understanding of the importance of experiential learning for students and the wider benefits of community engagement from both the school and university perspectives underpinned the growth and success of this partnership.

Experiential learning and community engagement have been well documented in the education literature field [2]. The case study outlined in this paper extends this discussion to the practical application of engaging a partnership whereby both parties have common goals and a mix of skills that forge a sustainable and effective bond.

2 Literature review

Experiential learning can be defined and described in a number of ways. It has been used interchangeably as problem based learning or experiential learning. Perhaps the most widely accepted definition has been proposed by [3], as learning based around an action strategy where the student is actively engaged with real life situations that act to stimulate real life activities and occurrences. Celsi & Wolfinbarger also stress the importance of the vital ingredient being the student changing from a "passive knowledge to an active knowledge acquirer" [2]. Kolb further defines this learning as one where knowledge is created through the "transformation of experience" [4]. The major

focus is to center learning on a real life context which, in turn, acts to create a sensible and real connection for the student. Students must participate in the activity, critically reflect upon the activity and draw insight to enable a more complete learning activity. In short, the process is activity oriented and demands the student to engage, reflect and be involved using a critical frame of mind. Current literature on experiential learning recommends the use of instructional strategies such as case studies, guest speakers, role play, simulations, and surveys and debates as methods to ensure the student is engaged in an active rather than passive sense.

Experiential learning is now established in the tertiary sector. Evans and Lang [3] propose that schools must offer an increase in experiences that mirror the real world. Moreover, this learning is more applicable to the dynamics of teaching team work and leadership that currently occur in the work place.

Educational institutions are under pressure to develop and implement new and innovative approaches to learning from the wider public community and business communities. In areas such as the tertiary sector experiential learning is increasingly receiving more attention as university faculties such as business schools are being pressured to be more "strongly aligned with their stakeholders" [5]. More importantly, the students themselves seem more aligned with this approach to learning. The current generation of business students is "…growing up in a social environment that is progressively interactive and communication intensive, they expect a more stimulating educational experience to maintain interest, concentration level, and motivation [6].

At the primary and secondary school level family involvement is a vital ingredient for overall educational success. The literature presents three conclusions on the importance of the partnership of school and family. Firstly, parents demand more and better information to help guide their children through middle level and high school. Secondly, students benefit from the involvement of family and community in high school. Finally, educators in middle and high schools must take on increased responsibility for developing goal linked partnership programs. These partnerships "must aim to reach all families" [7]. Interestingly parents in this study wanted more and better information about adolescent development and the challenges that brings. They also want knowledge on helping their children better develop their talents, meet high school requirements and plan for the future [7].

The benefits of a wider involvement are many and varied for the students actively participating and for students not directly involved. Typically, these benefits include better attendance rates for students, better rates of homework completion and a better understanding of the school mission [7]. Collaboration with community activities included drawing upon and coordinating the resources of organizations such as businesses, civic and religious groups and government agencies. These links with external agencies act to strengthen school programs, family practices and overall student learning and development. Community involvement facilitates engagement - a process that results in many benefits for all parties.

2.1 Community engagement as a learning and teaching tool

Community engagement has previously been defined in a narrow sense [8]. In the wider context of education there needs to be a definition that meets the "…ethical, reciprocal, and interactive relationship of shared learning fostered between the discipline in question and the external communities [8]. Strategies required, however, to create and maintain effective and sustainable community engagement are more complex. Activities and practices such as service-based community projects, volunteer work, work-based learning, field work and research collaborations are all effective methods, of engagement [8]. The question is further complicated when we consider what the term community actually entails. Communities are not always generic entities-in fact there is often a high degree of overlapping where individuals belong to multiple groups under the banner of community [8]. Despite this level of ambiguity community engagement must be acknowledged as a vital component of the curriculum, "linked seamlessly with other learning and teaching activities and providing an important form of experiential learning" [4].

2.2 Community engagement as a process

To be effective, community engagement also needs to be managed as an ongoing process. Bednarz et al. [8] recommends a three stage active learning process. The first stage involves preparation, thinking and discussion in the class prior to the interaction. The second stage involves active and effective engagement with the community to meet pre-determined objectives, followed by a period of reflection on the actual learning experience. The authors also point out that engagement can also be undertaken from the local to inter and or transnational communities-communities that can be diverse in their characteristics [8]. This global characteristic adds a great deal of potential and possible benefits to the process if properly managed.

2.3 Benefits of community engagement

Reflection can increase cognitive benefits through the application of properly exercised experiential learning methods. When used in conjunction with community engagement students are able to exercise more autonomy over their learning, thus allowing for more active learning at a far deeper level. Community engagement also has the capacity to help developmental and interpersonal skills when used in combination with academic learning helping increase student motivation levels [8]. This engagement adds a sense of reality as students engage with the community and are exposed to its unique issues and problems that provide a richer learning experience.

2.4 Applications of experiential learning in marketing

Marketing is defined in this paper as "…a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others [9]. Applying experiential learning concepts would therefore involve using the strategies mentioned above that assist the student in the learning activity. Examples include role playing and simulations such as designing a marketing plan, using a survey to obtain data and perhaps even working in a marketing firm. This type of application can be applied to other important areas of the marketing process, such as marketing research, given that it is a fundamental component to understanding the overall marketing process.

Marketing research is a process of discovering information about markets and their unique needs, including competitors, market trends, customer satisfaction with products, services and, ultimately, to better understand the marketing process. An experiential learning approach allows strategies such as role playing to be used to simulate market research situations. This method provides new approaches to making marketing research more realistic to both the practitioner and the student.

2.5 Teaching marketing research in an experiental learning context

Marketing research attempts to "systematically link the consumer, customer and public to the marketer through information-information that is then used to identify marketing opportunities and problems and to then re-evaluate marketing actions and performance" [9]. This broad definition provides scope for the development of a problem based approach to learning. For example, linking the public, customer and consumer to the marketer demands a more active approach to learning-one based on real life simulations. Marketing research can then be taught using role play simulations, creating and designing surveys after testing using colleagues, environmental scanning simulations, interviewing consumers and customers and creating tools to analyse marketing performance of the strategies used.

Within the marketing research literature the benefits of experiential learning have been well documented [10]. The use of real-life research projects is a common vehicle utilized for the experiential learning experience within marketing research courses. These projects are usually conducted through the use of group activities with the added pros and cons of student group work and its subsequent assessment and administration dilemmas [11]. Lecturers in charge of marketing research units must therefore canvas clients (or allow students to select their own) each semester and monitor the entire process with each individual client over the course of the semester. This significantly increases the administrative workload. Ideally, a situation where the

community could participate and benefit from the project learning assignment as well as assist in the administrative tasks associated with the process would be of mutual benefit to universities and the community and as outlined by Bednarz et al. [8] could *"create a working relationship where the academic and intellectual ideas of the institution of higher education can be used to help meet the needs of the community".*

3 Background

This paper presents a partnership developed between The Department of Education and Training (a government department of the State Government of Western Australia) and a local university's business school to provide strategic information to a select group of primary and secondary schools within the metropolitan area. The following discussion describes the educational environment as way of a background context to this study.

Education within Australia, and indeed on a global scale, is now treated as a commodity that can be evaluated and chosen like any other product or service [12]. Therefore, there is a need for schools to market their services to the community or target segments within the community while being cognisant of their government and non government (public and private) school competition that also exists.

It has been argued that the previous Australian federal government, in office from the period 1996 to 2007, implemented a number of policies to enhance the marketisation of schools and intensify the competition between and within government and non government sectors [13]. These policies included dezoning government schools, the growth of selective, specialist schools and strong competition from a more diverse range of non-government schools produced real market pressures on existing schools. Parents now shop around for their children's education, looking for information much like buying a car or a home [12]. As such, "more and more schools are developing an orientation that includes marketing as part of their daily administration and in strategic planning for the long haul" [14].

3.1 Western Australian context

In Western Australia there are 776 public schools. There are 28,000 full time staff, delivering services to 250,712 students (2006 internal DET document). The West Australian Department of Education and Training (DET) is committed to its core objectives of improving the quality of the education in public schools for all students and increasing the participation and retention rates of 15 to 19 year olds. In more recent years, there has been a trend for all schools to incorporate a marketing perspective toward their internal and external communication activities. This has involved schools developing niche marketing strategies and subsequent communication strategies to position their school in relation to their competition by building upon their own unique strengths. Underpinning this strategy is the aim for public schools to establish a relationship with their community.

There are a number of issues affecting the ability of schools to develop effective marketing strategies to promote the benefits of public education and to build relationships between a school and its community. Traditionally, the view of marketing by educators has been limited to an understanding of marketing primarily viewed as the brochure approach to marketing. Schools adopt the view that marketing is a win-lose scenario between themselves and other schools. This creates head-to-head competition between public and private schools. This competition within the public sector can be viewed negatively by the public who expect to see a united system of public schools working together to deliver common strategic objectives.

The Department of Education and Training commissioned Western Australia's Edith Cowan University, School of Business, to work in a partnership to provide strategic information to a select group of primary and secondary schools within the Perth metropolitan area. Eight schools were made available for second year marketing research students to conduct research with the aim of contributing to the following four outcomes.

3.2 School needs

Schools within the program needed information to assist in answering the following questions:

1. What does the local community think about the school?
2. What do parents/carers think about the school?

3. What is the effectiveness of newsletters and other communication materials?
4. What is the best way to communicate with key stakeholders?

It was anticipated that a range of strategies and tactics would be developed for individual schools or school clusters to maximise their marketing activities. This would facilitate greater coordination and integration of school marketing leading to a more unified approach and greater awareness of the benefit of public education. The program also aimed to develop school staffs understanding of contemporary marketing practices using the assistance of university under/postgraduates. The focus was on service marketing, with an integrated marketing communication approach, focusing on the school's internal and external audiences. Schools also wanted clear positioning information to develop unique, branding strategies that differentiate them and align a school's customer focus with its position in the community. In addition, information to assist in preparing each school's promotional and event planning strategies was sought.

4. The Model/ Process

As outlined earlier, the three stage learning process proposed by Bednarz et al. [8], was used as a framework for the planning of this project.

The first stage involved preparation, thinking and discussion in the class prior to client interaction. Students were initially immersed in a intense three week lecture and reading program to provide them with an understanding of the research process and techniques for qualitative data collection (the exploratory phase of data collection). Discussion on the proposed topics and clients for research were then outlined. Students were shown a video presentation depicting a student conducting a client based research project. The video illustrated the student's journey through the total process from client interview to the final report preparation stage. Students were presented with options that included projects based on real-life, client driven problems or consumer research ideas that were not linked to real-life client problems. Students had the choice on whether they would engage in community based projects or conduct consumer research projects drawing on respondent samples from within the university community. Pros and cons of each option were clearly discussed.

The second stage involved active and effective engagement with the community to meet pre-determined objectives. The option to take up the education project was offered to students on a voluntary basis. Students were briefed by an employee of the Department of Education and Training. A total of 30 students from the total class of 74 volunteered for the school education project. Students worked in teams of 3, 4 or 5 members on each of the eight primary or secondary schools included in the project.

The first task for the students was to develop a research proposal for their school's principal (client). After approval of the proposal the students were allowed to commence the research work. The timeframe for the project was a 13 week semester, with the proposal due for submission after week 6 of the semester. Students were responsible for setting up meetings with their school's principal and researching background information on the marketisation of schools (from interstate and overseas), their school's locality and environmental issues and related theoretical concepts. The proposal included a statement of the research objectives, summary of the background literature and any expert interviews, suggested research design, research data collection methodology and suggested analysis. The format for the final report was also presented.

Either two or three focus groups or ten to twelve in-depth interviews with parents were carried out by the students. A summary of key findings from these sessions was included in the proposal. In many cases, this represented the first piece of empirical data conducted at such an in-depth level. This was illustrated by the following comments from one secondary high school principal *"One thing that came out of the focus groups was that parents wanted better communication from the teachers which is something we can work on"* (Kelmscott Senior High School Principal).

Once the principal had approved the proposal, the quantitative phase of the data collection could then take place. A questionnaire was developed in conjunction with students, DET staff and the lecturer. A generic questionnaire format was used throughout all the schools with some local

adaptation as necessary for each school. The questionnaire asked questions based on parent perceptions of the school, its facilities, teachers, and learning programs. It also covered such topics as communication between the school and parents and the search and evaluation used to choose the school. Questionnaires were sent home with students and in some cases the school newsletter highlighted the survey and encouraged parents to complete and return the questionnaire. Incentives were provided in some of the schools and these helped increase response rates. Response rates varied across the schools from a low 19% through to a significant 57 %. The questionnaire data was input in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and analysed according to the objectives. A report for each school was presented to the respective Principals at an event held by the department to celebrate the success of the venture. Prizes were awarded to the student group who presented what was considered the best report.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Community is about people coming together in many different ways and in many different places and working together for common goals, within informal and formal relationships [7]. This paper has outlined a model for partnership between education providers within a community resulting in benefits for all stakeholders including students (primary, secondary, and tertiary), parents, teachers, lecturers, principals and the community at large.

The model seeks to establish a layer of expertise within the education sector in researching community needs in education on a local needs basis. It reflects the reallocation of resources from the tertiary education sector to traditionally under resourced areas of the community – schools and community groups. This was reflected in the comments from one school principal on the project, *"Teaching is our business and this (marketing) requires a different set of skills, which is a challenge – we need to look at it from a different focus other than our teaching and learning background"* (Ocean Reef SHS Principal).

This model can now be replicated within any primary/secondary school. It has been used successfully at two non-government schools within the same geographic area and by one other university business department.

The success of the partnership was dependent on the close collaboration between staff from ECU and DET. A strong working relationship was developed quickly and effectively. Clear lines of communication were established and a mutual professional trust and respect was adopted by key staff. Clear division of responsibilities were established early in the planning process. In addition, students were given ongoing support and encouragement in their endeavours. The lecturer provided guidance and either attended or moderated the first focus group at each school.

This model has the capacity to assist in creating long-term partnerships and relationships. By building on the relationship and processes established, and the implementation of measures and follow-up of performance indicators can ensure an ongoing relationship, requiring periodic reviews and further research work. This is necessary given the competitive environment in the educational arena. As identified by one school principal *"We are in a more competitive environment than ever before so marketing has to get more competitive and we need to be able to promote what we are doing and what we are about"* (Principal, Kelmscott Senior High School).

Outcomes from the program were both diverse and created impact. School principals found the information reassuring and also surprising as indicated by this comment from Shenton College Principal *"The ECU project allowed the school to quantify the parents' satisfaction, which was high. It gave us a real insight into where the marketing happens and how powerful word of mouth really is. We were also really surprised about the high proportion of parents that checked our website for information – so now we know we have to keep it up to date."* From the student perspective, students gained valuable experience for their résumés. In addition it was noted that students involved in the education project were highly motivated during the semester. These students attended lectures, were both punctual and attentive. They could readily engage in their 'work' environment and engaged with students and parents within the focus group sessions. Students have autonomy over their learning environment in a nurturing familiar environment. They gain a sense of reality

and source of future employment opportunities.

Experiential learning is context driven by its very nature. The social dimensions and existing infrastructure determine the learning environment and learning experience. A well developed model and partnership can go a long way in providing a nurturing, effective, learning environment.

Tell me I will forget, Show me and I may remember, involve me and I will understand.

~Horace

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