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Table of Contents

A comparison of student perceptions of learning effectiveness of on—line and face-to-face, project-based pedagogy

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Abstract

Experiential, project-based learning is widely endorsed as an effective pedagogy for enhancing the understanding of theory, increasing critical thinking skills, and preparing students for future roles as contributing employees. Likewise, the use of online classes at universities is becoming pervasive. Few studies are available comparing face-to-face and on-line, project-based learning. This research compares student perceptions of the effectiveness of on-line and face-to-face, project-based venues in a course on strategic management. Results indicated that of the three factors compared: active learning, utility, and relevance, venue had no effect on student perceptions of active learning or utility. The implications are that project-based pedagogy can be expanded globally to include online curriculum as well as the classroom.

Keywords: online education, project-based learning, experiential learning, active learning

Introduction

Face-to-face and on-line courses have been compared in the past in a variety of fields with mixed conclusions (Morgan, 2015; Dendir 2016). Project-based courses have also been compared to traditional classes. However, few, if any, comparisons have been made of face-to-face, project-based pedagogy to on-line classes and virtual projects. The purpose of this study is to compare the perceptions of student learning in an on-line, project-based strategic management course with those of a face-to-face, project-based course to better understand the influence of course venue.

For several years, the authors have taught face-to-face, project based strategic planning classes in a business capstone course. Prior to the start of each semester, regional businesses are interviewed and screened to find appropriate clients for strategic planning projects for student teams. Likewise, the authors have taught on-line, strategic management classes in a non-project-based format. In the previous semester, faced with a plethora of clients, the instructors decided to try assigning actual clients to the on-line student teams to work with virtually. The motivation to aid these additional clients provided the opportunity for this study with the research question determined as "what effect would venue (face-to-face or on-line) have on the perceptions of student learning in experiential, project-based courses?"

Using the validated Experiential Learning Survey (ELS) developed in the field of social work education (Clem, Mennicke, & Beasley, 2014), survey responses from students in the on-line, project-based course were compared to those in the same course taught face-to-face.

Literature review

A review of applicable literature contains three sections: (1) educational psychology, (2) experiential learning, and (3) the primary methods that have been adopted in Strategic Management education beyond the traditional textbook-based approaches to learning: case studies, simulations, and project-based learning (Jennings, 2002).

Educational Psychology

Cherry (2019) stated that educational psychology is concerned with the examination of how people learn. The process includes educational specifics such as the instructional process and student outcomes. Mayer (2001) noted that positive steps have been made to educational practice and cognitive theory. Specifically, the author argued that two significant steps are 1) the psychology of subject matter – how people learn specific subjects, and 2) the teaching of cognitive processes, the evolution of how students learn. Michel, Cater, and Varela (2009) asserted that students demonstrated greater cognitive outcomes in a study that compared the results of an active teaching approach to the more conventional passive or lecturing style. With active learning, instruction that makes students responsible for their own learning, "students must do more than just listen: They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most important, to be actively involved, students must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" (Bonwell & Elson, 1991, p. 5).

Experiential Learning

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, (AACSB), defined applied experiential learning as: "A business curriculum-related endeavor which is interactive (other than between teacher and pupil) and is characterized by variability and uncertainty" (Gentry, 1990, p.10). The experiential approach to teaching strategic management was outlined by Singh (2018) as a process requiring students to 1) conduct external and internal environmental analysis on a market and an organization, 2) create various analyses and forecasts based on possible situations, and 3) develop potential strategies that would guide the firm to an aspired future state. Canziani and Tullar (2017) argued that the primary goal of student-led, client-based experiential projects was to develop critical thinking skills and that consulting opportunities enhance these competencies in ways that differ from other instructional methods. Business schools and colleges of business utilize multiple methods to teach strategic management. George (2015) reported that the use of experiential teaching and learning is instrumentally invaluable in guiding students to learn and grasp real-time challenges businesses face in today's complex environment. Further, the author noted that the experiential learning process provides hands-on involvement that can enhance the development of hard skills, soft skills, and foster behavior modification in students.

Primary Methods to Teach Strategic Management

Case Studies

Case studies, popularized by the Harvard Business School, can be characterized as a description of a business or a specific set of obstacles confronting the organization or its activities (Cornwell, 2012). According to Davis and Wilcock (2003), case studies are "student-centered activities based on topics that demonstrate theoretical concepts in an applied setting" (pp. 3-4). Instructors can utilize these problems in various teaching modalities as illustrations of real-life lessons.

The use of case studies to teach strategic management has both its advocates and its critics. Mintzberg, Quinn, and Voyer (1995) noted that case studies are ideal scenarios for investigating real-world issues. Jauch and Glueck (1988), Johnson and Scholes (1993), and Thompson and Strickland (1999) put forth similar arguments regarding the efficacy of utilizing case studies to teach strategic management. Chang (2003) declared that numerous researchers affirmed that the use of case studies could advance the student's capacity to understand and retain information by inserting a dose of realism into the classroom (Christensen & Hansen, 1987; Osigweh, 1989; Dooley & Skinner, 1977; Romm & Mahler, 1991). On the flip side, Yin (1989) and Garrido-Lopez et al. (2018), argued that case studies, while offering a clear contextual framework for analysis and synthesis, are limited in representing the complexities of the real world. One criticism of using the case study method to teach strategy is that due to the static

nature of data available in a case, the scope of decisions available to the student is narrow (Mitchell, 2004).

According to Jack (2018), considering the rapid change in global demographics, women managers are not sufficiently represented in the case study method of instruction. Further, given the widespread argument over globalization, a disproportionate percentage of cases are focused on U.S. organizations, and certain viewpoints, including those of labor unions, are underrepresented. Anand (2017) posited that the utilization of case studies was quite suitable for a more settled world, but the breadth and scope of today's challenges calls for a new approach.

Simulations

Simulations are the business game approach to the analysis of an organization in a competitive situation. A realistic simulation enables students to analyze various factors that can impact an outcome while developing analytical expertise, management skills, and communication (Schroder & Liviu, 2012). Ceschi, Sartori, Tacconi, and Hysenbelli (2014) stated that the primary goal of a business game is to develop management skills, analytical know-how, and to teach decision-making skills relative to business strategies. In a review of the literature assessing the value of simulations, Reid, Brown, and Tabibzadeh (2012) professed that despite the high degree of attention spawned by the simulation teaching mechanism, the preponderance of the literature examined did not indicate statistically significant confirmation that the learning outcome was more compelling than the use of other educational methods. One ongoing criticism of the use of simulations to teach strategic management has been the automation of the decision-making process. For example, emergency loans to bail out a poor decision are allowed with little, if any, regard to overall financial planning (Poisson-de Haro & Turgut, 2012). An argument was put forth by Jennings (2002) that contended the use of simulations may not readily be translated to real-world business circumstances.

Project-based Learning

Project-based learning "is a student-driven, teacher-facilitated approach to learning. Learners pursue knowledge by asking questions that have piqued their natural curiosity" (Bell, 2010, p. 39). Thomas (2000) noted from various project-based learning handbooks for instructors that projects are complicated assignments built on the foundation of demanding situations that require student immersion in analytical activities, problem-solving and outcome resolution. Additionally, with project-based learning, the students must work independently and as a team to develop and deliver a final product or presentation (Jones, Rasmussen, & Moffitt, 1997; Thomas, Mergendoller, & Michaelson, 1999). The essence of project-based learning is the examination process. This process requires students who develop questions relative to the project being directed through the research procedure by the instructor.

Xiao and Carnes (2017) observed that when teaching strategy to college level undergraduates, a significant challenge is the students' dearth of relevant work background, participation, and know-how. Often lacking the appropriate job experience, students find that many of the topics covered in a strategic management course are problematic relative to their ability to embrace and comprehend when being taught by traditional methods. Students who learn through project-based experiential methodology can more readily grasp first-hand the intricacies of day-to-day life in an organization and how to deal with multiple challenges both internal and external. Project-based learning, where students engage in projects related explicitly to real-world business situations, has proven to be a boon for not only the students but for the outside clients, many of whom return for additional assistance by future student teams (Thompson & Edwards, 2009).

Distance and Face-To-Face Learning Effectiveness

Distance education is defined as "Education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously" (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018, p. 5). Driscoll, Jícha, Hunt, Tichavsky, and Gretchen (2012), wrote that numerous researchers (McFarland & Hamilton 2005; Parkhurst et al. 2008; Summers, Waigandt, &Whittaker 2005; Tucker 2001) reported the positive attributes of online learning versus face-to-face. Conversely, other investigators (Logan, Augustyniak, & Rees 2002; Urtel 2008) offered contradictory arguments to the view that online learning was as effective as face-to-face teaching in providing an overall positive learning experience.

The review of the literature assessing distance learning versus face-to-face teaching revealed conflicting views when examining course-specific subject matter. Morgan (2015) found that students graduating from online accounting programs scored lower on the CPA exam than those who graduated in a matched set of face-to-face accounting programs. Contrary to Morgan's findings (2015), Dendir's (2016), examination of two Principles of Microeconomics courses at a U.S. public university determined that the online students earned higher scores on a set of universal questions given over three exams. In a study of a college level operations management course delivered by both online and face-to-face classroom instruction, Nemetz, Eager, and Limpaphayom (2017) research revealed that student performance as measured by their grades was the same regardless of the delivery mechanism. In an exploration of educational delivery methods on knowledge retention, Turner and Turner (2017) concluded that while online instruction may deliver greater short- term knowledge procurement, the synchronous face-to-face instructional delivery yields more significant levels of knowledge retention. Stern (2004) put forth the suggestion that future research might evaluate which types of courses are more applicable to distance learning while others may be less suitable.

While academic literature provides multiple examples of varying pedagogical methods as well as comparisons of face-to-face and on-line courses, there are few, if any, evaluations of face-to-face, project-based curricula to on-line, project-based courses. With the effectiveness of project-based, experiential pedagogy well acknowledged and the growth of on-line courses widely recognized, an investigation of the effect of combining the two approaches was of interest to the researchers. Could an on-line, project-based course with virtual student teams be just as effective as a face-to-face, project-based class? If so, on-line curricula could benefit from the enhanced, project-based learning experience. Similarly, the application of project-based, experiential learning could be substantially expanded due to the growth and convenience of on-line venues. Taking the opportunity presented by a semester with too many client projects, the researchers adapted the structure and syllabus of the on-line program to closely match the traditional course. The methodology employed, findings, and conclusions follow.

Methodology

Students in the face-to-face and on-line classes followed the same procedure and process for conducting their projects except that the on-line students met with clients via video-conferencing platforms and with each other using virtual technologies (phone conferences, video, email, and texting). In both venues, students were placed in small teams and interviewed their client companies early in the semester to learn about the business. Afterwards, the instructors provided 6-7 weeks of training on how to conduct research related to compiling a situational analysis and how to write a formal strategic plan. For the remainder of the semester, the student teams worked on their projects culminating in a written plan graded by the instructor and an oral presentation to the client (either face-to-face or virtually). All projects

followed a similar process as described by Wright & Fowler (2017) to provide a formal strategic plan for the client.

Gauging the impact of venue on the project-based learning approach was accomplished through surveying the student perspectives of their learning experience. The specific research questions that were addressed were: did the venue affect the student's perceptions of the active learning experience, the utility of the project as it applied to understanding the course content, or the relevance of the project as it applied to their future professional goals?

Participants and Procedure

Students who major in a business discipline within the AACSB-accredited B.S.B.A. program at Western Carolina University are required to take a management capstone strategic planning course during their final academic year. Students in five sections of this course were surveyed in the Fall and Spring semesters of the 2018-2019 academic school year. Participation in the survey was anonymous and participation did not have any impact on the student's final grade. The demographic make-up of the classes was unremarkable with no differences in sex, age, or ethnicity. Students in the face-to-face class were given the option of taking a paper-based or on-line survey. Fifty-six out of 115 students responded for an overall response rate of 48.7%.

Materials

These students were asked to complete a 29-item survey based on Clem, Mennicke, and Beasley's (2014) Experiential Learning Survey (ELS). The ELS scale is designed to measure a student's perception of meaning or value of experience-based educational instruction. The study states that: …it is rooted in experiential learning theory and intended as a method of assessing various characteristics of hands-on learning experiences, including how the environment influenced the learning objective, how useful the experience was in preparing the student for issues related to practice, and the likelihood of the student using the material learned from the activity into future work (Clem et. al, 2014, p. 493).

It was validated in a study of five hundred and fifty-three students enrolled in human service courses utilizing a multidimensional survey. Clem, et. al conclude that: "Results from this validation study revealed that the ELS is a valid and reliable tool for assessing various characteristics of hands-on learning" (p.490).

This 28-item ELS survey was modified with the addition of one item (Q29 – see Appendix) in which we identified whether the student was in a traditional face-to-face class or an online class. Responses were based on a 7-point, Likert scale with choices ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

Results

Analysis of the data indicated three distinct constructs: Active Learning, Utility, and Relevance. The items for each construct in the study were selected based on Clem et. al, 2014) Experiential Learning Survey. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was employed to assess the reliability of the factor constructs. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sample Adequacy was 0.817, exceeding the recommended value of 0.60. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (p-value = 0.000) was also significant, indicating, along with the previous results, that the data were suitable for EFA. Principal component analysis (PCA) approach with oblimin rotation was utilized in the EFA procedure. Kaiser's criteria (eigenvalue>1), and cumulative percentage of variance extracted (60% or higher) both indicated that three distinct factors were present (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tathan, 2006). In the original research study, Clem, Mennicke, and Beasley (2014) had reported the existence of four factors: Environment, Active Learning, Relevance, and

Utility. The study had not included Environment due to lack of sufficient internal reliability. Results of our analysis confirmed the same result regarding the Environment factor. Thus, it was also excluded in further analysis.

Reliability analyses on the three remaining factors was performed to determine the level of internal consistency (see Table 1). A Cronbach α score above 0.70 is typically considered acceptable and a score of 0.90 or above demonstrates excellent internal consistency (Hair et al., 2006). All factors consisted of four items and exceeded the minimum acceptable level of Cronbach α of 0.70.

The survey design utilized Likert scale data and there is much discussion in the literature regarding the treatment of Likert scale data as interval data. De Winter and Dodou (2012) compared the t-test with the Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon analysis for five-point Likert data and determined that both statistical tests yield the same results.

An independent samples Student's t-test was performed, treating the data as interval, to identify if there were differences between the student's assessment of the learning effectiveness of project-based pedagogy based on the venue. The three factors consisted of 12 items, out of which, three separate items (see Table 1) were found to have a statistically significant difference based on venue. These three items (Q9, Q13, Q23) related to interest in the material and the usefulness of this information in their future. Upon analysis of the individual responses and demographics of the respondents, the researchers posit that the on-line students represent a more homogeneous group of students, the majority of which were business law students, compared to the face-to-face classes which were more heterogeneous groups with a variety of majors that were represented. The difference between these groups may have influenced the results for these three items.

Table 1. Factor Loadings, Reliability, and t-test of individual items

	Item	Active Learning	Relevance	Utility	Cronbach's α	p-value
Q2	I expect real-world problems to come up during this learning experience.	.944				0.881
Q6	I am stimulated by what I am learning.	.933			0.948	0.111
Q7	The learning experience requires me to do more than just listen.	.876				0.549
Q10	I feel like I am an active part of the learning experience.	.741				0.050

Q#	Item					
Q11	The learning experience requires me to really think about the information.	.791				0.065
Q13	I care about the information I am being taught.	.741				0.284
Q9	I find this learning experience boring.		.802			0.142
Q15	This learning experience has nothing to do with me.		.844			0.063
Q23	This learning experience will not be useful to me in the future.		.879		0.896	0.158
Q27	I doubt I will ever use this learning experience again.		.944			0.194
Q20	This learning experience falls in line with my interests.			0.803		0.049*
Q24	I will continue to use what I am being taught after this learning experience has ended.			0.974	0.890	0.179
Q25	I can see value in this learning experience.			0.846		0.192

Q26	I believe this learning experience has prepared me for other experiences.			0.896		0.107

Analysis of Likert data as interval data was discussed by Boone and Boone (2012) who stated that composite scores, produced by summing the individual item responses of four or more Likert scale items, could be treated as interval data. Composite scores for each of the three factors: Active Learning, Relevance, and Utility were created by summing the individual item scores for those factors. Differences between the student's assessment of the learning effectiveness of project-based pedagogy based on the venues were assessed by performing an independent samples Student's t-test for each of the three factors (see Table 2).

Table 2. Results of t-tests between face-to-face and online delivery methods

Factor	Face-to-face	Online	t	p-value
Active Learning	37.69	34.57	-1.620	0.115
Utility	25.62	23.10	-1.951	0.060
Relevance	24.54	20.57	-1.944	0.061

The results indicated that although there were no statistically significant results ($p < 0.05$ level) for Active Learning and Utility, the results of the Student's t-test for the Relevance factor was statistically significant. Students in the online sections of the management capstone strategic planning course perceived more relevance of the course than those in face-to-face sections. The researchers hypothesize that, since many online students are typically fully employed, they possibly make clearer connections between their careers and the course materials compared to students in the face-to-face sections, whose primary responsibility is to be a full-time student. However, no specific employment data for the students were captured and the actual differences in work status are unknown.

Discussion

Academic literature continues to tout the superiority of project-based learning pedagogy to traditional, lecture-based courses (Watts & Jackson,1995). However, there has been little, if any, research comparing on-line and face-to-face, project-based learning. This is perhaps due to the dearth of available on-line, project-based courses. In the experience of the authors, such courses require a good deal of extra effort in preparation and execution. This may discourage educators from designing such pedagogy.

However, the findings of this research show the benefits to be worthwhile. Similar to Neuhauser (2002) in a comparison of on-line and face-to-face class venues, this study demonstrated no detrimental differences in such project-based pedagogy as well. In actual fact, on-line participants found more relevance in project-based pedagogy than face-to-face participants. The indications suggest the opportunity of expanding the curriculum of on-line programs to include more project-based courses which are widely acknowledged to provide superior learning experiences to traditional, lecture-based classrooms in many cases. This raises the prospect of introducing project-based pedagogy to address the complex subject of globalization with virtual teams interfacing with non-regional and even international clients. As

noted by Voronchenko, Klimenko, and Kostina (2014), the educator's role has changed from the "sage on the stage" to that of a creator of contemplative and collaborative projects that challenge today's connected students with compelling learning contexts. Future research is warranted into utilizing creative educational programs such project-based pedagogy to illuminate how to live in a society characterized by globalization. Topics such as cultural diversity and tolerance for other viewpoints are of critical international importance and can be uniquely explored through project-based learning. Crawford and Kirby (2008) posited that digital technology offered numerous possibilities to advance global awareness. Exploring the fusion of project-based pedagogy, technology, and instructor best practices would be a worthy endeavor as educators strive to develop students to think as global citizens. Lastly, examining the use of project-based learning via virtual classrooms as a mechanism to address global sustainability could provide a transformation and dose of reality as students develop different perspectives and assumptions toward this worldwide concern.

Hu and Pazaki (2012) argued that many students at the regional level lack the desire to examine critical aspects of global interest. Additionally, the authors noted that meager levels of global competency existed among students, often due to cultural illiteracy and institutional barriers. For regional universities, especially those in rural settings, the added dimension of international student engagement with global businesses could be of considerable value.

The intention of the authors is to continue to collect data over time to gain confidence and credibility in the initial findings. We are hopeful that other researchers may pursue additional comparisons of project-based venues in a variety of other settings.

Appendix

Survey Items

Q1   The setting where I learn helps me understand the material better.
Q2   I expect real-world problems to come up during this learning experience.
Q3   The environment I learn in does not enhance the learning experience.
Q4   The learning experience requires me to interact with people other than students and teachers.
Q5   I expect to return to an environment similar to the one where this learning experience occurs.
Q6   I am stimulated by what I am learning.
Q7   The learning experience requires me to do more than just listen.
Q8   The learning experience is presented to me in a challenging way.
Q9   I find this learning experience boring.
Q10 I feel like I am an active part of the learning experience.
Q11 The learning experience requires me to really think about the information.
Q12 I am emotionally invested in this experience.
Q13 I care about the information I am being taught.
Q14 The learning experience makes sense to me.
Q15 This learning experience has nothing to do with me.
Q16 This learning experience is enjoyable to me.
Q17 I can identify with the learning experience.
Q18 This learning experience is applicable to me and my interests.
Q19 My educator encourages me to share my ideas and past experiences.
Q20 This learning experience falls in line with my interests.
Q21 I can think of tangible ways to put this learning experience into future practice.
Q22 This learning experience will help me do my job better.
Q23 This learning experience will not be useful to me in the future.
Q24 I will continue to use what I am being taught after this learning experience has ended.

Q25   I can see value in this learning experience.
Q26   I believe this learning experience has prepared me for other experiences.
Q27   I doubt I will ever use this learning experience again.
Q28   I can see myself using this learning experience in the future.
Q29   Please indicate the setting in which you took this class. I took this class:

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