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Collaborative Learning: Businesses and HE Co-Create

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Introduction

This novel research pivoted around a collaborative cyclical learning experience between businesses in a City Centre scape and a local Higher Education Institution. This concept provided for a dual aspect to learning; third level MBA students in parallel with business operatives in a City. The students were tasked with addressing a business problem in cooperation with City Hall and to write a 'service charter for this city', while being assessed for progression for their MBA. This Collaborative experiential learning (Kolb, & 2017) centred on a group of 22 MBA students while they interacted with 20 businesses in a European City to research, develop and write a service charter. Details of the development of the charter per se are not dealt with in this paper, just the experience of its development by the students and business alike.

Finding novel ways to assess third level students is always a challenge for Higher Education Institutions. Imagine the opportunity of being placed at the fulcrum of learning and business development through a dual aspect collaborative learning challenge and experiential learning. An experimental approach was afforded to MBA level 9 students when they were tasked with writing a 'Service Charter 'for their City – while in parallel, being assessed through 'problem solving' for 5 ECTS credits with the third level partner. The dual aspect of learning and co-creation between businesses and college began when the students sought to solve a problem for City businesses and find a solution to their problem and reflect on it, and the second, when a recommendation came from the research that the businesses needed to undertake further training in order to implement the plan of the final City Service Charter.

A City Service Charter

A concept that is not widely embraced (hence the scant academic literature), the purpose of a service charter is to outline and detail the standards a customer or client can expect when engaging with service providers in a City. A City service charter is a collective commitment by all of those engaged in the daily service life of the City to focus on the needs and preferences of their customers, motivated by values such as respect, integrity and excellence.

Method

Examining student assessment practices to evaluate if there is a benefit in collaborative learning experiences through PBL is the context of this work. Twenty-two MBA students and 20 businesses were involved in this research as well as one member from City Hall. A mixed methods approach was applied, and both sets of data were triangulated (Patton, 2012). To examine the experience of the learning of the students a positivistic research methodology was applied as quantitative facts can be directive and informative (Harvey, 1998). A quantitative research survey instrument using a Likert scale was developed after the learning, and in conjunction with colleagues involved in department programme development. The questionnaire was tested to eliminate any errors and cleansed prior to surveying. All 22 MBA students (9 female, 13 male) were asked to fill out the survey in person in a class setting to ensure 100% participation. The survey was completely confidential so that private contributions and negative experiences where they arose could be provided in strict confidence.

For the second element of the research, the business participants were asked in person about the experience of working with the students and their implementation of the service charter when it was put into practice. A qualitative methodology was applied as it was believed that a post-positivistic approach (Patton, 2012) would gather in-depth answers from participants about their experiences. In all, 20 City centre businesses participated in the interviews with an interview guide of 10 questions.

Findings & Discussion

This section sets out some of the pertinent findings from this large study; however, the restriction of the paper limits the presentation of all the findings.

Students Experience

Of the 22 students, 87% stated that is was a positive experience. Stress was mentioned by 5% who maintained that it was a taxing experience overall. When asked about solving problems together as a class unit to come up with a plan, 66% stated that working in a class group was enjoyable overall. In terms of personal development, 39% stated that it improved their professional development skills, with 30% stating that the process will benefit their interpersonal skills in the future due to the specific nature of the task of dealing with City businesses and City Hall.
From a negative perspective, some students did state that they believed that the real-life challenge was stressful as they were tasked with delivering a working document that was to be used in the future by City Hall and participating businesses. 25% of the students worried initially that they may not be "up to the task" – or, "the standard required", as the work was of the level of a "professional consultancy". Overall, 90% stated that they would love more collaborative learning with industry in the future for other modules.

City Traders Experience

Findings from the City traders were extremely positive –Some of the positive comments included, "I enjoyed working with younger people to determine how they viewed our City and our service delivery". Another participant stated that it "was a novel experience and I learned so much more about overall service delivery". The next retailer stated that "we have to be competitive as a City and this project focused our minds on how to be more competitive!". Other participants noted how much they enjoyed the training that they had to partake in themselves to learn how to implement the charter that the students devised.

Conclusions

Setting a real problem and encouraging enquiry is a perfect way to assess students in Higher Education settings (Biggs, 1999). The findings of this research are very positive in the context of collaborative learning and PBL with a HE institution and local businesses. Theorists provide much debate around the ideas & philosophies for the use of PBL and advocates of collaborative and PBL provide compelling benefits in the literature for their use. This has been reflected in this current research. Using collaborative and problem solving can provide original and exciting challenges for instructors and their students. The benefits of this type of learning experience and assessment for the students especially at MBA level are all-encompassing as MBA students need and deserve to be challenged and PBL provides this where the students can become part of a 'real life' collaborative team in an organizational setting; in this case a City scape setting.

Overall, solving the problem, developing the charter and the continuation of the learning was a very positive experience for all involved. The MBA students helped decipher the mindset of the City business community, by conducting surveys among regular shoppers, tourists, occasional visitors and residents, and consulting broadly with many interested contributors. The operationalization of this charter continued the cycle of learning, as all 20 service providers who signed up to the charter undertook a short training courses to facilitate its implementation. This training will be ongoing, with all protagonists engaging with those who experience the City routinely.

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