

Getting Ready for the Real World: Student Perspectives on Bringing Industry Collaboration into the Classroom

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Abstract:

Learning through industry collaborations is critical in decreasing the gap between the real world and the academic environment. Working on challenges drawn from industry can increase students' knowledge and future employability, thus enhancing labor force preparation. This study explored students' perceptions (n = 110) of the benefits and challenges of working with industry projects as part of a creative thinking and problem-solving course. As a result of the industry collaboration, students reported more meaning to their learning experiences, deeper relevance to their future career paths, and increased motivation to deliver quality outcomes for industry and their class instructors. The challenges included pressure to impress industry representatives and the complexity of real-world problems.

Keywords: industry collaborations | student perspectives

Article:

Learning through industry collaborations in classroom activities is critical in decreasing the gap between the real world and the academic environment. Working on challenges drawn from industry can increase students' knowledge and future employability (Collins, Curtis, Curtis, & Stevenson, 2007), thus enhancing labor force preparation. Yet most academic programs focus largely on increasing students' cognitive skills, with few programs incorporating activities using industry collaborations (Fleischmann, 2011). Such collaborations are especially critical for industry-based majors, such as textiles and apparel. This issue is particularly crucial given that academic curricula largely lack "an integration of both industry and the academy" (Wright, Cushman, & Nicholson, 2002, p. 122).

Students benefit from industry collaborations. They can be ensured that what they learn is highly related to the real world, which will allow them to make more informed decisions upon

graduation (Hirsch, Anderson, Colgate, Lake, Shwom, & Yarnoff, 2002). Including industry collaborations in academic curriculum also encourages reflective thinking and increases problem-solving skills (Cox & King, 2006). It also can increase student teamwork and communication skills, particularly ways to communicate effectively with clients and suppliers (Hirsch et al., 2002). Despite obvious benefits of industry-based learning activities, little research has examined students' opinions about such collaborations. This study explored students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of working with industry projects as part of a university course assignment.

Method

Two faculty members teaching a creative thinking and problem-solving course in an apparel program collaborated with Payless ShoeSource, a large U.S.-based shoe company, to develop projects that allowed students to apply creative thinking strategies to solve real-world problems. Students in the course were drawn from the apparel, events, and hospitality management majors and had 1 month to complete and present the projects. The 110 students worked in self-selected groups of two to three persons. The course was taught over two semesters. Students also were asked to keep a journal in which they recorded and reflected upon their experiences related to completing and presenting projects developed in collaboration with industry partners.

Two representatives from the merchandising and sourcing department of the Payless Shoe-Source Corporate Office in Topeka, Kansas worked with course instructors to develop the project descriptions (see Appendix 1). The projects involved redesigning packaging for shoes, hosiery, or scarves and required: (a) researching the industry's typical and best practices related to the presented problem and writing a one-page report; (b) developing an innovative solution to address the problem; (c) producing a packaging prototype; (d) addressing costing, transportation, and display issues in a final one-page report; and, (e) presenting the project's outcomes to the company representatives. Approximately 3 weeks before the project due date, Payless representatives Skyped with the class and answered questions related to the project. These representatives subsequently came to listen to and evaluate students' final, 3-minute presentations.

At the end of the course, the 110 weekly reflection journals were collected and an interpretive content analysis was conducted to better understand students' perceptions regarding the projects (see McCracken, 1988; van Manen, 1990). The research received institutional review board exemption status. Student names were changed to protect anonymity.

Results

The analyses and interpretation resulted in the emergence of an array of students' perceived benefits and challenges of industry-based learning activities and industry-presented problems. The results share four benefits and three challenges, using student quotes to illustrate the main sentiments expressed in the journals.

Benefits

Students agreed that working on a "real" industry-based assignment gave more meaning

to the project and course learning outcomes. Student Jeanine commented, "I thought this project was very beneficial because it wasn't a typical Power-Point; it was real life. In the real world there's a ton of challenges and deadlines to be met.

As a result of the industry collaboration, many students reported they took the assignment more seriously, invested greater effort, and were more motivated to deliver quality outcomes. Student Martha stated, "In comparison to typical assignments, I felt more drawn to putting time into this project. Knowing it was an actual issue that needs my assistance gave me motivation to work hard on the project." According to Hannah, "The pressure was on, because I wanted to make something that would impress them and would make them want to work with Iowa State students again. I didn't want them to think that we were not capable to come up with good ideas to use."

Students greatly appreciated the opportunity to interact with industry professionals while working on the project. Another student reported, "I thought it was nice having the representatives in class to give immediate feedback on what they thought about the idea and how easily it would be able to be implemented."

In their journals, students consistently discussed how important this project was to their future careers, especially meeting someone else's expectations. Student Sandra stated, "We are supposed to be preparing for life after college, and working on a realistic assignment can really put things into perspective and allows you to realize your own potential when it comes to thinking up creative ideas." For Andrea, the most beneficial aspect of working on a real-life industry problem was "experience of what I need to do to satisfy someone's requests. It was different doing a project where the client had certain expectations, not just what you yourself wanted to do. This has made me a more detail-oriented person because of the many requests and expectations that Payless was looking for." Student Charlotte indicated, "This project gave me a look at what I will be doing for the rest of my life, which is finding creative solutions to a problem. In my future career I need to know how to take a problem and solve it according to the needs of my consumers."

Although instructors may strive to provide assignments drawn from industry, the inclusion of actual industry representatives in project creation and evaluation seemed to provide extra motivation to the students. Cara wrote, "Knowing that the Payless team would be in the room took the project to another level for me because it made the project more real." Overall, the students' perceptions of the benefits of this approach to learning correlated with those suggested in the literature (e.g., Cox & King, 2006; Hirsch et al., 2002).

Challenges

In comparison with non-industry based assignments, the project proved to be a challenge for some students, particularly for those who felt greater pressure to perform and "impress" company representatives. Students commented that it was "nerve wracking" and "stressful" to be "judged" by industry professionals as opposed to course instructors when presenting the project outcomes. According to Mary, "It was cool that we got to actually talk to the team and show them our projects, but at the same time it was a little intimidating." Student Lisa stated, "I didn't think I would be nervous at all, but when everyone was in there presenting it was really nerve wracking! I was worried they would ask something that I could not answer." Some students indicated this pressure was positive because it kept them, as Naomi indicated, "motivated to do professional work."

Another challenge was that industry-presented problems were broader and more complex in nature than typical academic assignments (e.g., required integration of research on consumer behavior, prices of materials). Moreover, because the problems were complex, there was no obvious "right" answer and, at the end, there might be no "perfect" or "final" solution found to solve the problem, but rather different opportunities explored that might potentially solve the problem. However, precisely because the problems were challenging, they stimulated critical and creative thinking as well as analytical skills—all very important qualities that potential employers are looking for in college graduates. Student Amanda wrote, "This project differed than our other projects because you could not just come up with a creative idea and call it good. You really had to plan it out and critically think how merchandising the product was going to truly affect Payless workers and consumers. ... It was a great way to really get us all thinking how we would attack real problems in the industry."

Although the creative thinking and problem-solving course emphasized generating as many unique and original ideas as possible to solve a problem effectively, the real world often has limitations including costs, logistics, and client needs. Students felt that this limited their creativity. As noted by Ashley, "We did unfortunately overlook the fact that our shoebox design would not stack well for storage. I was frustrated with this fact as we worked so hard to put together a feasible idea and didn't think about shipping and displaying the shoes."

Summary and Conclusions

This study explored students' perceived benefits and challenges gained from implementing industry-based assignments in a creative thinking course. The results indicate that students appreciated the opportunity to work on real-life projects as a part of their coursework. They believed that such collaborations will prepare them for the real world. Students were able to apply knowledge and skills acquired in their studies to solve industry problems and receive feedback from company representatives on their ideas and outcomes. In addition, interaction with industry professionals helped hone their presentation and communication skills.

The elements of research, writing, and oral communication were highlighted by students as benefits of the collaboration. Even though students frequently mentioned that the industry-based assignment was associated with greater pressure and stress to "perform" and "deliver," such experiences should help build resilience, self-confidence, and motivation.

The research findings are useful for family and consumer sciences (FCS) educators who are considering incorporating industry collaborations into the college and university classroom. Although students also noted challenges, these learning experiences helped prepare students for the workforce of their future. FCS course instructors should continue to utilize industry collaborations because they provide students, as stated by Missy, "Experience in using creativity in a professional way." It is important that universities forge and devote time to relationships with businesses and organizations and for FCS educators to design courses that better ensure a full understanding of future employers' expectations in terms of skills and knowledge. These types of collaboration are win-win situations. Everyone benefits—FCS programs and graduates, higher education, and industry.

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Appendix 1

Project Description:

This project takes on a real-world challenge from the footwear industry. Scarves are usually packaged in an easy to display orientation with the product exposed for the customer to see and touch. The Packaging is expensive for scarf producers and harmful to the environment since most consumers throw the packaging away after the purchase. For this project, our client is Payless ShoeSource. Your task is to create one packaging solution that can be used to display five different types of scarfs: the infinity loop scarf, pull through faux fur scarf, fashion scarf, cold weather scarf, and pashmina scarf. The packaging solution should: fit on current pegs at stores; be sturdy and durable enough to hold scarves weighing up to 3 pounds; easy for employees to inventory and stock; all while reducing costs and enhancing the customer experience.

Project Expectations:

The project will be completed in teams of two-three people. Spend some time in a Payless Shoe-Source store. Observe customers shopping for scarves. Are customers buying it as primary reason for visiting the store, is it secondary, is the purchase an impulsive buy? For this project, you need to understand how Payless Shoes stores operate and what type of packaging will and will not work for the self-service concept of the store. Conduct research about different types of scarf packaging currently used by competing companies. Present the outcomes of your research in a one-page report that: 1) summarizes best practices in scarf packaging with an explanation how they could be used by Payless ShoeSource and 2) identifies directions Payless could pursue in scarf packaging. The report has to demonstrate that extensive research was performed and information applied to the client company.

Project Presentation:

Present your original packaging concept as a detailed technical drawing with size dimensions and description, and construct an actual 3D prototype representing your idea. The technical drawing and prototype should convey your idea completely, so no verbal or written explanations are needed. Include a one-page executive summary detailing how your packaging concept: is convenient for store associates to use and enhances customers' in-store experience; reduces manufacturing and sourcing costs; is efficient for storing and looks attractive for displaying scarves; has low environmental impact; and why Payless ShoeSource would want to adopt your packaging prototype. Each group will have 2-3 minutes to present the new packaging concept to our guests from Payless Shoe-Source and the rest of the class.