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An Exploration of Experiential Learning in Social Entrepreneurship

Jason Kaye
May 5, 2019

ABSTRACT

Experiential learning is key to creating a more valuable learning outcome for everyone involved. While we know value exists in these types of courses, we know little about what specific value is created for the stakeholders. Accordingly, I focus on a social venture consulting course at Northern Illinois University, adopt a qualitative, inductive methodology, and collect interview data from key actors involved in the course to study the value that is derived from this type of educational environment. My findings illustrate four aggregate dimensions (course development, expectations of stakeholders, experience of stakeholders, and outcomes) that shed light on what value an experiential learning course in social entrepreneurship generates for its stakeholders. I conclude with a discussion of my study's contributions to research streams on social entrepreneurship and experiential learning.

Keywords:

Experiential learning; social entrepreneurship, nonprofit consulting; qualitative research

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

Social entrepreneurship is becoming an integral part of business curriculum. In an MBA program, for example, it is common to make worthwhile contributions and adjustments to the program, but integrating a social component brings about significant programmatic innovation that would otherwise be unattainable (Weber, 2012). I have seen firsthand the impact a social entrepreneurship program has. It provides students, faculty, and other stakeholders the opportunity to make a real difference. It serves as solution to pressing social issues and as a means of developing sustainable communities (Howorth, et al., 2012). My motivation to conduct this research stems from the impact the NIU Social Entrepreneurship program has had on me. It is evident that the way the courses are taught and designed play a role in the value that is created. Through this research, I explore how an immersive experiential program in social entrepreneurship creates value for its stakeholders.

In the case of many successful programs, they are developed collaboratively with many different parties at the table. Co-creation involves working concurrently with a buyer and a supplier rather than a supplier customizing a product or service by themselves. An organization that co-creates their product, in this case a course curriculum, is by its nature experiential. The importance of this collaborative, engaging learning has been evident throughout prior co-creation research (Eriksson, et al., 2017).

A lot of research advocates for approaches that focus on action and practice and the educational opportunities that exist outside the classroom (Mueller, et al., 2015). It is becoming more and more common for pedagogical approaches that allow for students to engage in developing

innovative solutions, specifically for social problems (Smith, et al., 2008). This is because while experiential in nature, entrepreneurship education can sometimes fail to address problems that students care about (Mueller, et al., 2015). As part of a social venture consulting course, students get to put social entrepreneurship to practice while generating social value. Students, by nature, consider a course beneficial when they are engaged in active experimentation and gain experience from projects and activities (Pittaway, et al., 2015). This supports the notion that value exists for an experiential program in social entrepreneurship.

While the value creation produced by experiential social entrepreneurship programs is evident, gaps still remain. There is a need to further investigate the motives and perspectives of the different groups involved in a collaborative, experiential environment (Mueller, et al., 2015). Additionally, a lot of work remains to further understand the role and benefit of extracurricular activity in student learning (Pittaway, et al., 2015). My research will attempt to address these gaps.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected through a grounded theory approach. The theory associated with the research question evolved during the research process as the data collected was analyzed (Mayer, 2015). As shown in Table 1, my sample consisted of faculty, administration, and nine students in the spring 2019 Social Venture Consulting course (MGMT 421) at Northern Illinois University taught by Dr. Christine Mooney. I also collected archival data and observed the social consulting projects. This 16-week course entails partnering students with clients to identify business problems, develop viable solutions, and present recommendations to be

implemented. This course examines the strategic aspects of social enterprises with a focus on developing and implementing those strategies.

Additionally, my sample included the clients from the student projects. I engaged with these key stakeholders as well to better understand what value they receive out of an immersive experiential social entrepreneurship course.

The main source of data collection was the 11 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the Social Venture Consulting course. After each interview, I looked for patterns to develop concurrent themes across the different stakeholders to create the code book in Table 2.

The data was then analyzed by iteratively moving between the interview data, observations, notes and literature to generate the categories and dimensions outlined in the data structure in Table 3. In accordance with Gioia and colleagues (2013), I followed a three-stage data-coding process with the ultimate purpose of creating a detailed story. Initially, I analyzed the data from multiple sources to develop first order concepts. From these concepts, I grouped them into more abstract second-order themes. In the last stage of the coding process, I grouped these themes into aggregate dimensions in order to develop the aforementioned story line. Table 3 outlines the structure of the analysis and findings to show the overarching theoretical themes and dimensions identified in the research (Gioia et al., 2013).

FINDINGS

The main focus of my research was to explore how an immersive experiential program in social entrepreneurship creates value for its stakeholders. According to the research, the elements

which influence the value created for the stakeholders of the class include: the course development, the expectations of stakeholders, the experiences of stakeholders, and the outcomes. Below I discuss these dimensions in detail and present my findings following the structure outlined in Table 3.

Dimension 1: Course Development

Content. While the structure of this class is established by the faculty member through a syllabus, the content is at least partially determined by the individual projects. The variables that can be controlled are the initial class meetings focused on teaching consulting, the schedule that is created to provide the students with a timeline, and the overall course expectations and grading policy. This structure helps provide a foundation so that the success of the course is independent from the quality of the clients.

Client Selection. Potential clients are vetted and evaluated before being selected to be the focal point of the course projects. The problem they are facing plays a role in the selection process as it helps determine the level of quality their partnership would provide the students. Unlike a traditional classroom setting, this course is largely driven by the needs of the client. The scope of the course is determined by the problems that the clients need addressed.

Site Visits. This course also has a best practices trip component to provide the students with additional data that they can use for their projects. The trip includes visits with various entrepreneurs as well as an immersive experience in a different culture. The benefits of this trip is two-fold: (1) it provides students the opportunity to ask questions of successful entrepreneurs

that may be relevant to their projects; (2) it puts students in an environment that they are not accustomed to which can create a more stimulating learning experience.

Securing Students. Students are selected via a round of interviews with the faculty member to determine if they would be a good fit for the course. Over the course of the interview, the faculty member is able to get a better sense of how a student would handle an intensive, non-traditional learning experience. As this course requires a certain level of vulnerability from the client, it is imperative that the students selected are of high quality. From the student perspective, the decision to voluntarily interview for a course creates a level of buy-in that would not otherwise exist in regular course enrollment.

Dimension 2: Expectations of Stakeholders

Students. Students come to this class being told to expect the unexpected as the class is largely shaped by the needs of the client rather than a strict curriculum. That said, they do have expectations that shape their experience in this class. They expect the classroom to be filled with like-minded students who have the same type of drive and motivation for academia that they do. In a course project as intensive as this one, the people one works with can play a large role in the experience one has. Additionally, they expect the client to be transparent with them and the professor to be a resource they can go to if they need help along the way.

Professor. The professor has similar expectations the students have of the client. They expect the client to treat them and the students with respect as well as obtain a level of transparency that gives the students an opportunity to learn and engage with a nonprofit. The

professor also expects the students to lean in to the uncomfortable while understanding there will be resistance that comes along with that. Because the class is so intensive and unlike other class the students have taken, it is natural to be uncomfortable. However, the learning happens when the students lean in to this messiness that mimics the real world.

Clients. Clients are the main providers of information and content in this course. In doing so, they put themselves in a vulnerable position with the students and the professor. They expect the students to take this seriously and understand that this project has an actual impact on a real nonprofit as opposed to a case study that may be assigned in another class. They also expect the professor to serve as someone to communicate any concerns or feedback with throughout the course of the semester.

Administration. Administration expects that the students learn a lot out of this course and provide a high quality product at its conclusion. They want to know that the students worked hard because a lot of this type of work connects with what the students will be doing post-graduation. They also expect the faculty to be a coach for the students throughout the semester and help guide them through this consulting experience.

Dimension 3: Experience of Stakeholders

Student. Students develop in multiple ways throughout the course of this class. First, they are exposed to working with others which forces them to learn how to be effective team members with people who may have different work ethics and points of view. Additionally,

their knowledge and experience in consulting grows throughout this class. They are given the opportunity to put their own learning experiences to use with an actual client.

Professor. The intensive nature of the class can be demanding of a professor in a way that is different from that of a traditional class. As the 9:1 student-faculty ratio suggests, the relationship between professor and student is much more intimate in this course. The professor gets to know every student and helps and observes them grow throughout the course of the semester. The professor is also concerned with making sure the students are getting value out of this class.

Clients. The client experience is less intensive than that of the professor and students. From their perspective, they have the opportunity to receive free consulting – something that is especially valuable to a nonprofit entity. They learn that the more transparent and vulnerable they are, the better quality product the student consulting team can provide at the end of the semester. They have a few touchpoints and stay in contact with the students throughout the semester to help the students identify recommendations for them.

Dimension 4: Outcomes

Skill Development. The structure of the course leads to inevitable challenges and obstacles that the students are forced to overcome. Learning how to deal with these challenges over the course of the project helps the students develop personally. Being forced to have tough conversations with colleagues strengthens the students' communication skills and provides exposure to learning to work in a team dynamic.

Real-World Experience. The experiential and immersive nature of the course provides real-world experience not typical in a classroom setting. The course mimicked an actual consulting job and gave students exposure to uncertainty which helped to provide a realistic, hands-on experience. This course is unique in that the final product actually impacts a real organization. The interviewees unanimously agreed that the nature of this course prepared students well for their professional life after college.

Business Expertise. This class provides the opportunity to work with an actual business – something that is not typically offered in a class. In working with the client, students are able to see the innerworkings of an organization in the nonprofit sector. This exposure helps students connect what they have learned in their business classes to a real business.

Networking. Networking opportunities are also a large outcome of this course. Whether it be with team members, clients, professors, or best practice trip visits, the opportunities to make connections are plentiful in this class. The relationship between the students and the client is more intimate than that of a typical guest speaker because of the intense nature of the project. Clients are able to see a student's work ethic and expertise in action first-hand which enriches the post-course relationship between the two parties.

DISCUSSION

Value is created for all stakeholders in an immersive experiential social entrepreneurship course. My findings confirm the notion that there is value to be had for students, faculty, and clients

alike in this setting. In this study, I explored the impact the course has on these stakeholders and see what specific value was derived for each of the parties. Based on my findings, Figure 1 outlines a theoretical model of the value that is created for the various stakeholders in an experiential social entrepreneurship course.

My findings show both personal value and shared value exist for the three stakeholders that make up this course. The key value takeaways for clients are (1) receiving recommendations for operational improvement and (2) establishing connections with the University. These creations of value for the client contribute to their willingness to be a part of the course. Nonprofits are consistently seeking resources and involvement in courses like these provides that for them. For students, this course provides the opportunity to (1) learn the dynamics of working in a team setting and (2) prepare for professional life post-college. Students are put in an intensive situation that requires them to work closely with different individuals which can yield interpersonal conflict – something that can be hard to create in collegiate courses. Being exposed to these types of activities prepare students well for their career after education. For the professor, this course serves as an opportunity to (1) provide engaging and interactive curriculum and (2) partake in a more intimate and intensive teaching environment. Faculty can find solace in being able to provide a curriculum that is unique to students and something that will provide learning opportunities regardless of the outcome of the projects.

The shared value between the stakeholders further amplifies the impact this course has. For students and clients, they are exposed to client-consultant interaction. This is an amazing experience as it serves as an incredible learning experience for students while being free

consulting for resource-strapped nonprofits. For the professor and clients, this course builds strategic partnerships between the two parties. This can take many forms including future projects, research, and guest speakers in lectures. For the professor and students, this course exposes them to a level of uncertainty that cannot be replicated in another type of course. It gives a real, hands-on experience that can be messy, but yield tremendous learning outcomes. Collectively, the three stakeholders derive value in two key ways: (1) real-world experience and (2) strengthened communication skills. This course mimics a real consulting job and necessitates that all parties are adept in communicating with one another. These are components which create value for all three parties and contribute to what motivates them to be a part of the course from the beginning. While not a part of the model, the value administration receives is dependent on the value of these three stakeholders.

My findings contribute to the fields of social entrepreneurship and experiential learning education by illustrating the value that is derived from this type of course for all parties involved. It expands on the role and benefit that extracurricular activity has on student learning (Pittaway, et al., 2015). It also provided the perspectives of the different stakeholders and highlighted their motives behind participating in this type of course (Mueller, et al., 2015).

Finally, my findings in value creation for immersive and experiential social entrepreneurship education guides directions for future research focusing on different types of courses and larger sample sizes. For example, my findings suggest that there is value to be had for all parties in this type of course. Future research could further explore how this value is created for other types of experiential courses. The scope of my research was limited to one social venture consulting

course, but future research could evaluate the value associated with other experiential courses in and out of social entrepreneurship. Relatedly, future research could utilize a larger sample size of courses to compare the difference in value creation from class-to-class or year-to-year. Also, future research could further explore the different teaching methods and approaches to experiential learning and how the various techniques contribute to the value created for the stakeholders in each course.

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Table 1
Interviewee Demographics

| Int No | Identification | Gender | Age Range (years) | Major or Area of Focus | Years at NIU | Graduation Date | Location |
|---------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------------------|---|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Student | Male | 20-30 | Leadership | 2 | Spring 2019 | Creativity & Empathy Lab |
| 2 | Student | Male | 20-30 | Marketing | 2 | Spring 2019 | Creativity & Empathy Lab |
| 3 | Student | Male | 20-30 | Marketing | 4 | Spring 2019 | Creativity & Empathy Lab |
| 4 | Student | Female | 20-30 | Human Resources Management | 2 | Spring 2019 | Wirtz Hall |
| 5 | Student | Female | 20-30 | Leadership | 4 | Spring 2019 | Barsema Hall atrium |
| 6 | Student | Female | 20-30 | Social Entrepreneurship | 4 | Spring 2019 | Over phone |
| 7 | Student | Male | 20-30 | Social Entrepreneurship & Marketing | 3 | Spring 2020 | Barsema Hall atrium |
| 8 | Student | Male | 20-30 | Social Entrepreneurship | 2.5 | Summer 2019 | Creativity & Empathy Lab |
| 9 | Student | Female | 20-30 | Social Entrepreneurship | 3 | Spring 2020 | Barsema Hall atrium |
| 10 | Professor | Female | 45-55 | Strategic Management, Entrepreneurship, Social Entrepreneurship | 12 | N/A | Office |
| 11 | Administration | Female | 45-55 | Strategic Management | 22 | N/A | Office |

Table 2
Code Book

| Name | Description | Sources |
|---|--|----------------|
| Real-World Experience | The experiential and immersive nature of the course provided real-world experience not typical in a classroom setting. | 8 |
| Client Interaction | Value found in being able to interact with an actual nonprofit client that was going to use student recommendations to make an impact. | 4 |
| Learning Team Dynamics | Learned how to be effective team members by being exposed to this course. | 6 |
| Communication Skills | Expressed a belief that their communication skills improved over the course of the class. | 4 |
| Communication with Stakeholders | Unique opportunity to experience interactions with many stakeholders (teammates, clients, faculty, etc.) | 3 |
| Exposure to Nonprofit Sector | Value found in having exposure to the nonprofit sector, something that can be overlooked in other courses. | 4 |
| Consistency across expectations and course | The course structure (project content/project depth) was consistent with student expectations. | 5 |
| Feelings of Confusion with Course | The course structure (project content/project depth) did not match student expectations. | 2 |
| Challenge of working with Others | Challenge throughout the course in working with different people from different functional areas. | 5 |
| Different Work Ethics | Opportunity to learn how to manage and work intensively with a group made up of different work ethics | 5 |
| Value of Working with Others | Value in being able to learn and understand from working with different people and apply it to future professional relationships. | 5 |
| Post-College Preparation | Uncertainty and hands-on experience of the course prepared them well for their professional life after college. | 11 |
| Networking Opportunities | Value in networking with the various stakeholders throughout the course (teammates, clients, best practice visits, etc.). | 2 |
| Interview Process | Voluntarily interviewing creates a level of buy-in for the students. | 1 |
| Personal Development | Learning how to deal with challenges over the course of this project helped them develop personally. | 3 |
| Value in Exposure to Uncertainty | Exposure to the uncertainty of this project helped the students have a realistic, hands-on experience. | 5 |

Table 3
Data Structure

| First-order concepts | Second-order themes | Aggregate dimensions |
|--|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lessons on consulting, course timeline, and grading policy are structured. Structure provides a foundation so course success is independent of client quality. | Content | Course Development |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clients are vetted and evaluated to determine fit in course. Course is largely driven by client needs. Scope of course is determined by client problems that need to be addressed. | Client Selection | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Best practices trip provides data students can bring back to consulting projects. Visits to different entrepreneurs and immersion in different culture to benefit students. | Site Visits | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students selected via interviews with faculty member to determine if student is fit for the course. Student decision to voluntarily interview for course creates buy-in. | Securing Students | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students told to expect the unexpected because of the uncertainty of the course. Expect classroom to be filled with like-minded individuals. Expect client to be transparent with them and the professor to be a resource throughout the semester. | Student | Expectations of Stakeholders |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expects client to treat them and students with respect and be transparent with the class. Expects students to lean in to the uncertainty of the course which will lead to more learning outcomes. | Professor | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expect students to take this project seriously and understand the impact it has on their organization. Expect the professor to serve as someone to communicate concerns/feedback with. | Client | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expects the students to learn a lot out of this course and provide a high quality product. Expects the students will work hard because this type of work correlates with work post-graduation. Expects the faculty to serve as a coach for the students throughout the semester. | Administration | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to be effective team members with people who may have different work ethics. Knowledge and experience in consulting grows throughout the course. | Student | Experience of Stakeholders |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class is more intimate than a traditional setting (9:1 student-faculty ratio). Helps and observes the students' growth throughout the course of the semester. | Professor | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity for free consulting. Learn that the more transparent and vulnerable, the better quality product they can receive. | Client | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning how to deal with challenges over the course of project helps students develop personally. Being forced to have tough conversations strengthens communication skills and learning team dynamics. | Skill Development | Outcomes |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Course mimics an actual consulting job which gives students exposure to uncertainty which helps to provide a realistic, hands-on experience. Final product actually impacts a real organization. Interviewees unanimously agreed this course prepared students well for their professional life after college. | Real-World Experience | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity to work with an actual business. Students exposed to the innerworkings of an organization in the nonprofit sector. | Business Expertise | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Networking opportunities available between students, clients, professors, and best practice trip visits. Relationship between client and student more intimate than typical professional relationship. | Networking | |

Figure 1
Theoretical Model

