Experiential Learning Projects:
Engaging First and Second Year Principles of Marketing Students

Priscila Alfaro-Barrantes
Nichols College

Jean G. Beaupré
Nichols College

Brittany L. Jacobs
Nichols College

Experiential learning projects provide students with practical opportunities to apply theory, but are typically implemented in upper-level courses. This paper explores the impact of two experiential projects on first and second-year Principles of Marketing students at a small private business college in New England. Projects involved partnerships with external clients, providing students with the opportunity to explore concepts beyond the classroom. Findings suggest the value of implementing experiential opportunities early in a student's collegiate tenure with six themes emerging from these experiences. The six salient themes include increased engagement, intellectual challenge, student centered learning environment, link theory to practice, personal pride & teamwork, and professional development.

Keywords: experiential learning, marketing, education, principles of marketing, high impact learning

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning is referred to as "the study of learning through action." (Payne, Campbell, Bal, & Piercy, 2011, p. 206). This definition stems from Dewey's (1916) work that recognizes the learning process as dyadic—comprised of both passive and active components. Passive learning may include tasks such as listening to a lecture, while experiential activities would fall into the latter category. Within the context of marketing education, experiential learning serves as a means to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009).

The experiential learning process, as described by Kolb (1984), is comprised of four stages: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation. Following such a process, students actively engage in an activity. Upon completion of the activity, or a portion of the activity, they reflect upon their experience. Here questions such as, "What happened?" or "What were the results?" may be asked. In the third stage of the cycle students begin to think about their experience, "What did the results mean?," and in the fourth stage, students take what they have learned and

apply it to a new situation, thus beginning the cycle anew. Each time that the cycle is completed, students have the opportunity to build upon their previous knowledge and apply it to a new scenario.

Much research has suggested the value of utilizing experiential pedagogy (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009; Young, 2015), primarily guided by Kolb's (1984) model. Despite this, it is important to note that experiential learning is a tool that should be strategically incorporated into the learning process if the desired results are to be achieved (Brennan, 2014). Moon (2004) suggests that when incorporating experiential learning activities, the instructor must carefully structure learning outcomes, provide briefing sessions and/or handouts, develop tasks that directly apply to learning outcomes, allow students for opportunities for reflection, and also provide students with assessment criteria. These suggestions support the notion that experiential learning in the classroom is not merely a pedagogical tool where all responsibility for learning is turned over to the students; instead, instructors are integral to successful execution.

The significant planning and supervision requirements for experiential learning are often justified by the numerous powerful outcomes it can provide. Experiential education can help connect the institution to the local business community (Cantor, 1995; Schwartz, 2012), increase student engagement (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009), link theory to practice (Humphreys, 1981), intellectually challenge students (Haas & Wotruba, 1990), promote a student-centered learning environment (Estes, 2004; Morgan, Allen, Moore, Atkinson, & Snow 1987; Slavin 1980), and promote opportunities for working in teams (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Gray, Peltier, and Scibrowsky (2012) remarked,

> Experiential learning is a cornerstone of marketing education and a signature pedagogy for the discipline. Although experiential learning exercises have changed over time, offering real-world educational experiences are vital for preparing students to compete in an ever-changing and increasingly competitive job market. (p. 233)

To date, much research has explored the value of adding experiential learning to the marketing curriculum (Brennan, 2014). However, in most instances experiential opportunities are provided as internships or within upper-level capstone courses (Ganesh, Gopala, & Qin, 2009, Li, Greenberg, & Nicholls, 2007). In an effort to explore the applicability of experiential education in introductory courses, Drea, Singh, and Englelland (1997) incorporated experiential learning into the marketing curriculum during a Principles of Marketing class taking place during a student's junior year. In this example, students conducted marketing audits in which they "describe[d], but [did] not critique, the marketing decisions and relevant influences found for a local business" (Drea et al., 1997, p. 55). This project was shown to positively enhance the development of student business skills and to improve attitudes towards the college of business. Despite these valuable findings, at many institutions Principles of Marketing courses take place earlier in the academic career—primarily during the first or second years. Further, the course is regularly offered as part of the required business core and can be filled with the memorization of countless definitions – which makes the engagement of both majors and non-majors difficult (Young, 2002). Such truths bear the question: Is experiential learning theory applicable in a first- or second-year Principles of Marketing course? The purpose of this paper is to present two projects recently conducted with first- and second-year students that yielded positive results, suggesting that the answer to that question is *yes*.

Two Experiential Learning Projects

To explore the concept of experiential learning amongst first- and second-year Principles of Marketing students, the authors implemented semester-long high-impact projects. The projects undertaken in each class were slightly different and each is summarized below. It is noteworthy that once both projects started, they became the focus of the rest of the semester, with graded assignments that replaced other assignments and final exams. Both projects unfolded in three phases:
1. Ideation and Presentation
2. Logistics and Execution
3. Results and Reflection

Project 1: Crocs Campus Challenge

In her Principles of Marketing classes, this instructor typically encourages students to connect course concepts to brands with which they are familiar. The Crocs brand came up repeatedly in one section of the course, particularly during discussions about target audience, branding, and product development. The instructor suggested that the class reach out to Crocs, Inc. to see if they would be willing to have a member of their marketing team video conference with the class. Rather than just send an email, the instructor and the class decided to send a video inquiry. The students brainstormed in small groups, voted on their favorite idea as a class, and collectively created a video. The class was thrilled to receive a response from the Crocs team, who agreed to meet via video conference, while also issuing a challenge to the class. They asked the students to develop a Crocs program for their campus with a social media component, and if accepted, Crocs would not only provide prizes for the program, but also donate to a charity of the students' choice. This exchange occurred about half-way through the semester. The instructor then rearranged the remainder of the semester to allow students to focus on this project, thereby turning a traditional class into an experiential one.

Ideation and Presentation

First, the students needed to develop ideas to present to Crocs. With a group of 22 students, the instructor realized that developing a cohesive program that the whole class would support and be excited about could be challenging. However, their experience with collaborating on the outreach video gave the students a strong starting point, as they had seen how effective they could be when having a common goal and brainstorming in an open-minded manner. The students self-selected into groups to develop ideas to pitch to the full class. After hearing all the teams' ideas, the students decided to propose a #CrocsCampusChallenge during one week they would call "Crocs Week." They would challenge the campus community to actively use the hashtag via a variety of events and activities, and if there was enough engagement, Crocs would donate shoes to a charity. But they first needed to gain approval of their plan from Crocs.

The students worked on finalizing their presentation, including designing the program logo, determining the Crocs Week activities, outlining the incorporation of social media, detailing the charitable overlay, and developing presentation slides. These tasks were divided up by team, and combined into the final client presentation. Throughout this process, there was ample opportunity to connect to marketing concepts such as mission statements, social media analytics, influencers, and branding consistency. The instructor capitalized on these connections by facilitating discussions on content previously covered, and pausing the class to highlight and explain new terms and concepts as they arose. The presentation included the following suggestions for Crocs Week, which the students developed with their college student target audience in mind:

- Social media scavenger hunt (find cards hidden around campus; tweet a photo to be entered to win a Crocs gift card)
- Social media photo contest (showing your Crocs on campus)
- Chuck-a-Croc competition at basketball games
- Pre-finals stress relief event with Create-a-Croc and cookie decorating
- Crocs Day (wear your Crocs and win a prize on the spot if seen by the team)

On the day of the Crocs video conference call, every student arrived early to class and was professionally attired. First, the Crocs team presented to the students, describing their branding philosophy and marketing plans. This conversation reinforced many of the terms and concepts discussed in class, so the students were able to make connections from their classroom content to an international brand's marketing strategy. It was then the students' turn to present; the class had voted on three of their classmates to represent them. The students' ideas were approved and Crocs agreed to send prizes as well as a donation to the Haitian Health Foundation, the charity of the students' choosing. The caliber of student work was validated as the Crocs marketing team sent a message afterwards stating that the content and delivery of

their presentation was of a professional quality, and the marketing staff was excited to help the students implement their ideas. With their program approved, it was time to get ready to execute.

Logistics and Execution

In order to ensure the project was executed and documented properly, the instructor divided the class into six teams, with students choosing to serve on one:

- Three event teams, to plan and execute the various campus programs
- Social media team, to create posts, cover events, follow and respond to activity, engage with influencers
- Video team, to capture and edit footage of events for social media as well as a recap video
- Logistics and coordination team, to manage scheduling, prize distribution, etc.

The event teams communicated with and gained approval from campus programming, arranged for student coverage, collected prizes from the logistics team, and coordinated with the social media and video teams. The social media team developed the "voice" of the campaign, managed their schedules, identified campus influencers, wrote posts, and monitored activity. The video team ensured that all activity, including behind-the-scenes planning, was captured and edited into a wrap-up video at the end. Finally, the logistics and coordination team tracked all of the activity, managed prize distribution, and completed the project summary. All students were also encouraged to tweet from their own accounts and to promote among their personal networks. Breaking students into teams provided them with ownership over their assignments and facilitated grading. Regardless of their specific team, all students gained experience in social media, field and event marketing, and logistics, while serving as part of a larger marketing team.

Once the program kicked off, the class became more like a practicum than a traditional course. Class sessions were primarily used as team check-ins and planning. Teams provided updates to each other, and asked for input and ideas. Google Drive was used to track activity and share files. The College's marketing department was looped in, and helped to promote Crocs Week through their channels.

Project 2: The #NC22Challenge

Prior to the start of the semester, the instructor contacted The Warrior Connection (TWC), a non-profit organization that works with veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with the intention of attempting to integrate a high-impact project into her Principles of Marketing class. The instructor asked the TWC Executive Director if the organization would be willing to partner with the class in the development and execution of a social media marketing and fundraising campaign; TWC agreed.

Because the majority of students were in their first year of college (22 out of 24), they would not yet have a basic knowledge of the process and concepts related to developing a social media marketing campaign. For this reason, it was important to first review the process and concepts in class through lecture-based class sessions so that students could first acquire the content knowledge to then apply to the experiential learning activity (Hamer, 2000). The instructor explained the upcoming project to the class, stressing that the purpose would be to apply social media concepts learned in class to the development of a social media marketing/fundraising campaign.

Ideation and Presentation

The Executive Director of TWC set a time to visit campus to talk with the students approximately two weeks prior to the launch of the campaign. Before his visit, the instructor gave the students an overview of the organization and the importance of their mission. Although veterans can attend TWC for free, it costs approximately $2,500 to cover the cost of a veteran. Consequently, students decided that the goal of the campaign was not only to raise awareness about TWC but also to raise $2,500 to send one veteran to one of the retreats.

The students proposed naming the campaign the #NC22Challenge, incorporating the school's name and the number 22, representative of the fact that 22 veterans commit suicide every day (Kemp & Bossarte, 2012). The challenge posed by the students was for participants to complete 22 push-ups and to donate $22

to TWC. Once an individual had completed the challenge, they would be encouraged to nominate three people to do the same. The campaign was scheduled to run from November 1st until Giving Tuesday which is the Tuesday after Thanksgiving.

Logistics and Execution

To facilitate the class's work, the instructor created five student groups, each led by a student she had selected due to their classroom leadership and engagement to date. To help keep the student groups on track during both planning and implementation, the instructor provided them with a document titled #Roadmaptosuccess, updated every two weeks. The document outlined all the tasks that needed to be completed for the following two weeks, including meeting minimum post numbers (three times per week per student) and tasks such as creating videos in advance for later release. For example, the students created a video to post on the U.S. Marine Corps birthday and another to post on Veterans' Day. The team leaders were responsible for checking that their team members were staying on track, creating engaging work, and submitting their social media posts on time. All posts were graded individually. Students were also told that if the fundraising goal was achieved, the class would be exempt from the final exam.

Throughout the semester, the instructor gave the students smaller assignments to highlight specific content and ensure execution of important deliverables. Such activities included naming the campaign, establishing the components of the campaign, and social media audits. Throughout the process, student-led group discussions took place to ensure uniformity of messaging and maintaining contact with the client.

Approximately one week before the campaign launch, a video created by the students was posted explaining the campaign. The visit of TWC plus the video helped to create campaign buzz around campus. On the day of the launch, each student in the class posted a video created by a group of students doing the challenge and nominating three faculty/staff members to participate. Each day after that, the students continued to post videos that the instructor and the college marketing department shared. Because each video encouraged others to continue the challenge, the campaign quickly spread to the whole campus as well as family and friends of the students.

During class time on Giving Tuesday, the last day of the campaign, students were asked to reach out to people directly by email or text message. They explained that it was the last day of the campaign, and they were working hard to reach their goal. They encouraged people to donate even if they were unable to do push-ups, and reminded people of the mission of TWC and the importance of Giving Tuesday.

Results of the Projects

During the one-week #CrocsCampusChallenge program, the students organized eight events and received over 600 original posts and retweets; as a result, Crocs donated 200 pairs of shoes to the Haitian Health Foundation. The Crocs team offered positive feedback as well, expressing how impressed they had been by the students' ideas and work in a short period of time. Additionally, the local news channel heard about the project, and came to campus to interview the instructor and the students. This publicity opportunity spread the word about the charity, Crocs, and promoted the college as a place for experiential learning.

During the #NC22Challenge, the students raised approximately $6,000, significantly exceeding the class goal of $2,500. The campaign was featured in three different local newspapers and reached multiple states including Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, Florida, and California. Approximately a week after the campaign ended, the executive director of TWC and two veterans joined the class via Google Hangouts. They shared the total amount raised and thanked the students for their efforts. Students were given an American flag pin and were told they would be exempt from the final exam because the fundraising goal was reached.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In addition to the program results described above, a qualitative inquiry was undertaken to better understand the impact of the projects. The students were surveyed for their reflections using open-ended

questions. Their responses, which were overwhelmingly favorable, were coded and analyzed, and six themes emerged: (1) increased engagement, (2) intellectual challenge, (3) student centered learning environment, (4) link theory to practice, and (5) personal pride & teamwork, and (6) professional development. Table 1 presents quotes from students organized by themes.

TABLE 1
QUOTES FROM STUDENT REFLECTIONS ORGANIZED BY EMERGENT THEMES

Experiential Learning Theme	#CrocsCampusChallenge	#NC22Challenge
Increased engagement	• Overall, I think this project was awesome. Having the chance to connect it to the real world, and watch it all unfold was amazing. Every other project I have done in school was done just to get a good grade, and sure, we were graded on this too, but there was more to it. It didn't feel like a typical group project, it was more realistic, like a glimpse at something you would do in a career in marketing.	• Throughout this journey, I learned a lot about marketing as well as leadership. I was in charge of making creative video ideas to project our message out. While doing that, I realized how special it felt to be in charge of something, as well as tying in my creative side. I learned a lot about how driven I was as a leader to accomplish something that I was passionate about.
Intellectual challenge	• I think that a lot can be said for the impact that real-world experience can have on students. We could have sat in a class for the past several weeks and gone over the rest of the chapters in the book, but I can honestly say that I don't think we would have learned nearly as much as we did with this project.	• This was not a one-time assignment and that's it. It took the whole semester but it paid off at the end. • I learned that you have to be very persistent for your campaign to be successful. • One thing I learned is that during a campaign you must adjust to what is happening. You cannot stick to a plan and that's it. You have to remind open.
Student-centered learning environment	• I would like to see more of these types of projects incorporated into classes and I think it was great. It is definitely more productive than just taking tests and a great way to get experience. • I learned so much by being able to apply my 'textbook knowledge' onto a real company. Being able to hear their marketing team talk about concepts and vocabulary we had learned in class really helped to solidify my knowledge of the material. It also gave me a ton of examples which I can now use to remember that material by.	• I wanted to learn about social media marketing and I ended up learning a lot! • I really enjoyed working on this project. Coming into my first semester of college and running an actual marketing campaign was very nerve racking at first but ended up being a really great opportunity.

Link theory to practice	• Similar to an internship, this project allowed us to learn and experience things that simply cannot be taught inside a classroom. It is this real-world experience that will benefit us in the future when we enter the business world because we will have a better understanding of what marketing is and how it works. • Just like Crocs used celebrities, we used staff influencers to generate more buzz about our Crocs Week and help promote the events.	• I had no idea that there was so much to learn about social media. Before this class I never...thought about when the best times to post are or which outlets are the best to reach certain people. • I learned that making good looking and effective posts require a lot of time but when you put effort into your posts, people are more likely to pay attention • I learned a lot about both marketing and leadership through this project. I was able to apply everything we were learning in class directly to the project and see the outcome of it.
Personal pride & teamwork	• We were like divisions of a marketing team, each working towards the end goal. I think it took all of us to accomplish it too. We all had good ideas and the creativity of all of us together was amazing to see. We all seemed to mesh well and were super open to any ideas that made for a great working environment. • My parents were so impressed about this moment and loved how Nichols set us up for such a great opportunity. • Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that my first semester of my freshman year that I would be working with such a well-known brand. It is something I will not forget. • I went home and told my mom how adult and businessy I felt.	• My mom was very proud that I was working on this project because my sister is in the Army. • I learned that social media can really help an organization but reaching out to people and creating more personal connections is also very important. • I thought it was very cool that we were learning how to run a social media marketing campaign while we were helping veterans. I felt very good about that.
Professional development	• It was fun being able to video-chat with the marketing team to see how they were thinking and what we could do as students to prepare for becoming a member of an organization like that. I think being able to talk with and learn from real-world businesses is a very valuable experience. • The project gave me an idea of what it is like to work in marketing, beyond just the basic principles.	• I was an undecided major at the beginning of the semester but because of this project I decided to declare marketing as my major. • I am an international business major but I am now thinking about adding marketing as my major because I really enjoyed working on this project.

	• Having the ability to speak with industry professionals about their work provides insight that can otherwise not be received in the classroom.	

The results presented here also extend the literature suggesting that first and second year students can find similar, if not greater, value in early exposure to experiential learning. Students expressed that integration of experiential learning projects early on in the curriculum allowed them to discover their potential as leaders of a "real world" project, feel like a professional and not only as a student, feel proud that their work contributed to the wellbeing of others, understand how marketing concepts are really applied, work better in teams, understand the value of continuous hard work, among others. Furthermore, students were able to feel that their ideas were worth it and that their work made a difference beyond classroom walls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The implementation of the projects presented in this paper demonstrate the benefits and positive outcomes of incorporating experiential learning projects into Principles of Marketing classes with first and second-year students. However, upon reflection, the instructors acknowledge that there were many decisions and factors that aided in the successful implementation of these experiential projects, and have developed a set of recommendations for similar projects.

1. Identify an open-minded client: Since the project may be the first of its kind for the student participants, it is important to find a client that is open and willing to work in concert with the class. For an entry-level class, it is recommended that the bulk of client communication is managed by the instructor. In this manner, the students can observe and learn, preparing themselves for additional client interaction in upper-level courses.
2. Plan the semester wisely: It is important to execute the project at the right time, so that adequate content has been covered in the course, but with enough time remaining to implement a meaningful project. Generally, the authors recommend introducing the concept of the project at the beginning of the course so students know it is coming, and to start actual work on it about one-third of the way through the semester. The project should be completed at least two weeks prior to semester's end, to ensure the students are not distracted by finals in their other classes, and there is time to include a reflective/evaluative component and assignment.
3. Understand your college and departmental culture: In these two projects, the instructors were fortunate to be teaching at a college that encourages creativity and experiential learning. Further, the marketing program chair allowed flexibility in delivery of this required course, preferring students have a positive experience with the subject matter versus a mandate to cover a long list of specific content and terminology. It would be important to have these discussions prior to planning, to understand and work with the institutional context.
4. Remember to provide students with assessment criteria: Attaching grades to the projects provides a means for assessment and raises the stakes for students. It can also be problematic if not handled fairly and consistently. The instructors recommend a mix of individual and group grades, and clearly established criteria. Finally, graded written reflections are a critical component to closing the experiential learning loop.
5. Stress teamwork and communication skills: In all fields, the ability to work with others is a beneficial skill. An important by-product of these projects is the opportunity to develop teamwork and communication skills. For all students, but particularly with first- and second-year students, the instructors recommend spending class time facilitating the development of positive working relationships and the establishment of expectations. Low-stakes team-

building activities and some instruction on brainstorming and group dynamics prior to launch can be beneficial for preparing students to work together.

6. Remain flexible and be prepared to scaffold students: Unlike with traditional classes, experiential learning projects are more open-ended; faculty must recognize that there will be factors outside of their control and to expect the unexpected. The instructors quickly learned that as long as the students were engaged and learning something, the experience was worthwhile even if imperfect. In an entry-level course such as Principles of Marketing, faculty can expect to guide students more than they might in upper-level courses. Both instructors reported that a significant amount of organizational and logistical support was required on their part. At the same time, they agree it is time and effort well spent, as the students who participated would be more prepared when they tackle more independently run experiential projects in the future.

CONCLUSION

High-impact practices in higher education, in particular the active and collaborative projects detailed here, have been shown to improve learning outcomes including critical thinking, need for cognition, and socially responsible leadership (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015). The authors suggest that experiential education does not have to be reserved for final year courses or internships. Through the projects presented in this paper, students proved to have the capabilities to create deliverables that may have a significant impact on their learning journey, the campus community, and society in general.

Through the integration of experiential learning projects in lower-level courses, students are able to apply marketing concepts, experiment, and truly see their impact in real scenarios. By starting early, they have the potential to engage in numerous experiential opportunities and continue to hone their skills and confidence during their tenure in college. This directly relates to Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) which suggests that the experiential learning process is an ongoing journey of action, reflection, and experimentation. By providing students the opportunity to begin the cycle in their entry-level courses, we can set them up for future success in academia and beyond.

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