How to Organize a Real Life Problem-Based Learning Project in a Business Class Using Strength Assessment to Determine Team Assignment

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This paper discusses the benefits and challenges of using real world projects as a learning experience in college classes. Specific strategies and tips are shared for maximizing the likelihood of success of the project for both students and the client firm. Particular emphasis is placed on using strength assessments to assign student roles in the project.

INTRODUCTION

According to Kolb and Lewis (1986), an effective learner needs to develop skills in dealing with concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Using a class project involving real businesses seeking help in solving problems is one way that undergraduate students can develop their skills. However, there is a question as to which skills students should develop in order to have a positive effect on their careers.

The "Deficit-Remediation Educational Model" has been predominant in education for years. This model assumes that students are measured using some predetermined criteria to determine if deficiencies exist. Based on testing results, students are placed in special programs or given additional training, as needed, to help them overcome their deficits. An example would be the remedial programs that many colleges and universities provide for students.

Clifton and Anderson argue in their book *StrengthsQuest* (2001) that deficit-based, remediation programming can often interfere with students becoming top achievers. This type of training forces students to focus on their weaknesses rather than on their strengths. This process can then cause disillusionment, discouragement and/or reduced motivation, which may be one of the main causes of school dropout rates.

Clifton and Anderson propose a strengths-based approach as an alternative to the "Deficit-Remediation Education Model." This approach focuses on determining students' talents and developing those talents into strengths. Clifton and Anderson define the terms talents and strengths in a precise manner. According to their definitions, a talent is a naturally recurring pattern of thought or behavior that

can be productively applied in a real life setting. A strength is a talent that is developed to the degree that it provides consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity (2001).

Real world projects in selected business classes can be organized to help students define their talents and develop them into strengths. This paper will define the steps necessary to organize successful class projects with the purpose of helping students develop their strengths for achievement.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Project-based learning is a comprehensive instructional approach that engages students in sustained, cooperative investigation (Bransford & Stein, 1993). Students that work in a collaborative effort to solve problems can gain experience in:

1. Problem discovery and definition,
2. Asking and refining questions
3. Debating ideas
4. Collecting and analyzing data
5. Drawing conclusions
6. Presenting conclusions in a professional manner.

In many college classes today, case studies are a popular way to use 'project-based learning.' Case studies usually involve providing students with a set of information about a company and then asking the students to identify and solve problems. This helps students gain some insight into the complexities that managers face on a daily basis. Case studies have been used successfully for many years, especially in MBA programs and business schools.

Real world undergraduate class projects expand the traditional case study to include working with a real business on real problems. Students must collect and analyze data their own data, rather than have data provided to them. Once the data has been analyzed, students recommend a solution that will hopefully be implemented at the business (the client firm). Because of the amount of participation and "hands on" activity, real life projects offer an unparalleled method of student learning and engagement. As an added bonus, the student participants in real life projects can add the consulting project to their resumes. This resume addition makes a great conversation piece for students when they are in job interviews.

There are several key components that are necessary to make a real life project successful. These include:

1. Select the right organization. The likelihood of success of the consulting project depends in large part on having the right client-firm.
2. Have a plan. The project needs to be broken into discrete steps that will be relatively easy for students to accomplish on their own. The more detailed the plan, the better.
3. Put students in a position to succeed. Students need to be given assignments that match their talents and strengths. Thus, a strengths assessment is a key element in assigning student roles and teams.
4. Use the right evaluation tools. The grading system on the project needs to encourage hard work, cooperation, and good outcomes.

SELECTING THE RIGHT ORGANIZATION

Organization selection is an important part of successful real life project. "Leads" on potential client-firms can come from a variety of sources. Good sources of information on potential client-firms may include professional or community organizations with which the instructor is involved, the board of advisors of the college of business or the university as a whole, and former students who have themselves been involved in consulting projects. There are several important factors to consider in selecting an appropriate organization. These four factors are discussed below.

Management's Willingness to Use Available Time and Resources

The first challenge is to find an organization in which the client-manager has the willingness to spend the necessary time and resources with students to ensure a quality project. Potential client organizations should know up front that a substantial time commitment will be necessary for a successful project. At a bare minimum, two meetings between the client manager and the entire class should be required. The first meeting should occur at the beginning of the project. It should focus on defining the problems that the client-manager needs to have solved and the issues that need to be addressed in order to have a successful project. Depending on the nature of the project, follow-up meetings may be necessary between the client-manager and/or his subordinates and various student teams. The second required meeting comes at the end of the project. In this meeting the students will present the results of their work and receive feedback from the instructor and the client. This meeting typically involves a formal presentation from the students along with the delivery of a formal written report.

Based on the accumulated experience of conducting many real world projects, it is our opinion that mid-sized organizations probably make the best client organizations. Large organizations will typically have large budgets and thus prefer to rely on professional paid consultants for any "outside" work. They may be willing to work with students on minor issues or problems, but are usually unwilling to have students work on important problems. Small organizations usually do not have the time or resources to work with college students to help solve real life problems. They may need the consulting help, but are typically unable to afford the time investment to create a win-win situation. Mid-sized organizations tend to hit the "sweet spot" between willingness to work with students and ability to commit resources, thus they may be the best place to look for that client-student relationship necessary for a real-life project.

Students' Ability to Understand the Organization and the Problem

Of course most college business students have relatively little real world experience or expertise. Therefore it is imperative that the organization and its problems should be simple enough for college students to understand. Since students will be responsible for every step of the project, every step must be understandable to them. This basic principle applies to everything from the client meetings to data collection and analysis.

Due to the inherent complexities involved in many consulting projects it is a good idea to have a "model" project that students can use as a reference. Therefore the best projects and best client-organizations are those for which good model projects are available for the students to use as they work on the client-organization's problem. For example, some firms will allow the class access to old professional projects or business reports that are outdated, but still relevant to the problem being studied. Sometimes a professional report in another industry that addresses a similar problem can be found. Giving the students a model to follow is one of the most important factors in a successful project.

Availability of an Outside Expert to Advise the Students

Another important factor to consider when selecting the client-organization is the availability of an outside expert to advise the students in the real-life project. Outside experts are easy to find if you know where to look. Two good sources of outside experts are former client-managers and retired executives. Some former client-managers may feel obligated to help the class due to the benefit they received from previous class projects. Retired executives are frequently eager to share their knowledge and life experiences with students and are therefore willing to serve as advisors on student projects.

It is important not to ask the client-organization's direct competitors or potential competitors to participate in a class project, due to the private information that may be revealed. It is also very important to make sure that the class understands the value and confidentiality of private information. Having all students sign a non-disclosure agreement will both strengthen their knowledge of this process and increase their belief in the importance and relevance of the consulting project.

Finding the Right Driving Question to Motivate Students

A good consulting project requires a high level of effort from the student consultants. Finding the right "driving question" can motivate students to work with high effort and high quality outcomes when doing real life projects (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Good "driving questions" are interesting to the students and help convince the students of the importance of the project. The more interesting and important the question, the higher student motivation tends to be. Part of the art of selecting good client-organizations is in choosing situations in which the client-organization will receive a benefit, the students will be motivated to learn, and the professor will not get swamped in the process. Some industries are natural fits to create high interest in college students. For this reason sports, music, or other "entertainment" areas are typically good places to look when choosing a client-organization.

Ensuring Good Results

Of course there is much more to a successful project than a good "process." The main goal of any project is to have successful outcomes. For the client organization a successful outcome is a set of recommendations and solutions that are practical and can actually be used in the organization. For the instructor a successful outcome is for students to learn a lot and gain practical real world experience. For the students a successful outcome is likely to mean receiving a good grade on the project. Luckily these three goals are very well aligned. If the students are motivated and working hard they are likely to be learning, are likely to provide useful solutions to the client, and are likely to earn a good grade. To help insure these outcomes the instructor should emphasize to the students the importance of practical and workable solutions that are immediately beneficial to the organization. Solutions that are overly elaborate, overly expensive, or overly controversial are likely to be rejected by the client. If the recommendations are practical and useful, then management has solutions to its problems and the students have learned real life business skills.

HAVE A PLAN

Certain activities or tasks are necessary to accomplish any project. Before the project ever begins the instructor should have a good idea of the basic tasks that are likely to be involved. Examples of basic tasks that are common to almost all class projects are activities such as research, analysis of data, and business report writing. The instructor should begin the project with a general idea of how many different tasks are involved in the project and how many different student teams will be required. This plan can be refined and given more detail after the first meeting with the client-manager. After this meeting the instructor and the class should have a good idea of exactly what will be required for the project to have a successful outcome.

A good plan involves more than just a detailed list of tasks. A good plan should match specific students to specific tasks, based on the nature of the tasks and the skills of the students. For example, research is a fundamental component of most consulting projects. However, depending on the type of research needed, different sets of skills or talents may be required. One type of student may excel at library or internet research, while a completely different type of student may excel at focus group research, and a third type of student may excel at gathering survey research.

The more detailed the plan, the better the ability to determine the necessary skills needed to accomplish each task. Therefore, defining the tasks needed and connecting those tasks to the skills required on the part of the student, are some of the most crucial elements of having a successful class project.

PUT STUDENTS IN POSITION TO SUCCEED

In order for students to succeed they need to be given tasks that are a good "fit" for them. In order to achieve good fit, the instructor must not only have a detailed plan, but also have detailed knowledge of the skills and abilities of each student. So, once a project is selected, measuring student strengths and

talents for assigning project work is the next step in the process. Recall that Clifton and Anderson (2001) define talent as a naturally recurring pattern of thought or behavior that can be productively applied in a real-life setting. A talent that is developed to the degree that it provides consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity is defined as a strength. This is exactly the type of information that should prove very useful when assigning students to specific tasks or teams. There are two basic methods to determining student strengths: an informal method based on student self-identification of their strengths and a formal method based on a testing instrument like the Clifton StrengthsFinder.

Self-Identified Strengths

If the instructor has identified in detail the activities needed for the project, then one method for assigning tasks is to ask the class specific questions that require them to evaluate themselves on a 1 to 10 point scale as to how they perceive their abilities in certain areas. For example, if a focus group is needed for the project, then several tasks would need to be assigned. Some of the tasks would include calling experts to convince them to come to a meeting, being the focus group leader who will ask the questions and lead the discussion, and collecting and summarizing the data generated by the focus group. The strengths needed to accomplish these activities may not be the same. Separate questions should be included on the strengths instrument that relate to each task involved, not just for the focus group, but for the project as a whole. For reliability and validity reasons, it is best to have 3 to 5 questions that relate to each required role or task. Moreover, asking some questions that are positive in nature and some questions that are negative in nature will improve the ability to identify talents and strengths. The following questions are typical of those that might be used to identify a focus group leader. Notice that two of the questions are phrased in a positive manner while one is phrased in a negative manner.

1. I enjoy getting in front of a group of strangers to give a speech
2. I am not very good at stimulating conversation
3. I consider myself a good listener.

One of the problems with the self-identified strengths is the difficulty of assessing the reliability of the student answers. This informal method may not lead to better teams if students have misperceptions of their own abilities or if they do not respond honestly to the questions.

Clifton StrengthsFinder

A pedagogically better way to evaluate student strengths is to use the Clifton StrengthsFinder, which was developed through the work of Clifton and Anderson. Their work was based on and developed through the Gallup Organization. This instrument was first introduced in the bestseller *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by Buckingham and Clifton (2001). The Clifton StrengthsFinder (CSF) identifies 34 'signature themes' that relate to the dominant talents of an individual. These talents can be further developed into strengths. The 34 themes are shown in Appendix A. The Gallup website that is specifically designed for students is www.strengthsquest.com.

These signature themes have been found to be valuable on task assignment in class consulting projects. One important advantage of using the CSF instead of less formal measures is in its validity and reliability. Several studies have investigated its validity (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2009), its use with college students (Schreiner, 2006), and its use for business professionals (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). The CSF is also the basis of several bestselling business books, including *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (Rath, 2007). The CSF has the additional advantage in potentially being a tool that the organization's managers are already familiar with. Use of the CSF in team and task assignments may lend the project a more "professional" aura than more ad hoc methods of assignment. Appendix B shows several bestselling books based on the CSF.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder can help indicate those students in class with the highest degree of talent for each required task in the project. Use of the CSF also adds one more dimension of learning to the project. Students can learn quite a bit about themselves by taking the CSF. So the project becomes not only a real world work experience, but also a self-awareness builder. Understanding ones strengths and understanding how to structure tasks to take advantage of those strengths can be a huge confidence

builder for students (Hodges and Harter, 2005). Furthermore, grouping several students possessing the same strength together on the same team would give them the opportunity to improve their strength through the interactions of the team. Research suggests that top achievers build their careers on developing their strengths and associating with similar people while learning how to manage their weaknesses (Clifton and Anderson, 2001).

Team Assignment

Team assignments are the next step in organizing a successful class project. There are many theories on the best ways to construct teams to accomplish a task. Regardless of which particular team building theory an instructor subscribes to, detailed knowledge of student strengths can be very useful in assembling more effective teams.

There is a growing body of research among academics on how strengths relate to various personality traits, psychological factors, and the potential for success. Harter and Hodges (2003) explored the relationship between the Clifton StrengthsFinder and the "five-factor model of personality" (McCrae & Costa 1987). As predicted, there was a statistically significant correlation between such strengths as the Discipline theme and "Conscientiousness" ($r = .81$), the Woo theme ("winning others over") and "extroversion" ($r = .83$), the Ideation theme and "intellectance" ($r = .70$), and the Positivity theme and "agreeableness" ($r = .58$). According to Hodges and Harter (2005), several new empirical studies indicate that participation in the StrengthsFinder program can have an impact on desired outcomes such as confidence, hope, relational growth, and academic success. As far as using these methods of strength measurement for team assignments, it has been found very useful to assign a person with the strength of Woo (StrengthsFinder) to make the final presentation to the client-manager.

Moreover, using the strengths assessment process, instructors can group "compatible" strengths together and avoid combining "incompatible" strengths. This method is useful for fostering good interaction within teams and between different teams. The Gallup Organization has developed Four Domains of Leadership Strength (Rath & Conchie, 2009) in which all 34 themes are allocated among the domains of leadership strength: executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking. Rath and Conchie (2009) recommend that successful teams should be well-rounded with all four domains represented in each team. Gallup allows students to develop a Team Talent Map by inputting team members' strengths that are then grouped by the Four Domains of Leadership Strength. These four domains are shown in Appendix C.

USE THE RIGHT EVALUATION TOOLS

As any manager in the workforce knows, it is hard to evaluate people when you are not with them while the work is being done. It has been our experience, while doing group projects, in which a student receives a grade for the group's effort, that the assessment methods need to be structured in a proper manner so as to ensure a fair grade for each student. Using multiple methods of assessment may cause more work for the instructor during the project, but may prevent problems with unhappy students down the road.

First, the most important element in determining the project grade is the quality and contents of the work product. It is up to the instructor whether to limit grading to the final work product, be that a formal presentation a written report or some other form of "deliverable", or to grade some intermediate steps along the way. In either case, if the students had a detailed plan to follow, were assigned tasks that matched their strengths, and were offered enough help and encouragement along the way then the work product is likely to be very good. However there is always the possibility that something could "go wrong" and the work could be sub-par.

One of the major points of the consulting project is simulate "real world" work situations. In the case of a sub-par project, students need to learn one of the most important lessons of the real world – results matter. Ultimately it does not matter how hard the team worked or how many hours it worked if the end

product is sub-par. Of course the project is a learning experience, so if the project is sub-par the instructor will likely want to be more lenient with her students than an employer would be in the same situation.

Students will frequently value the comments of the client or experts more highly than those from the instructor. So, it is always a good idea to get input from the client-manager and any outside experts who were involved in the project before assigning a grade to the students' work product. It is useful to document the client and expert input in written form so students can receive accurate and complete criticism or praise and see exactly how it impacted their grades.

One of the major potential issues in any team assignment is the "free-rider" problem. Since students know the entire team will receive the same grade for its work product, some students will have an incentive to shirk their work. They will do this because they believe the more conscientious or grade-conscious students will work even harder to help ensure the team's success. Instructors must make it very clear up front that shirking will not be tolerated. Confirmed shirking should result in severe grade penalties or the student being removed from the consulting team (and thus presumably failing). There are two basic ways to manage the free-rider problem: monitoring and assessment.

Monitoring of student work during the project can often help instructors identify potential shirkers and take corrective action before it's too late. Some students may simply fail to understand the work expectations involved with the consulting project. Improved communication from teammates and the instructor can typically get these students back on track. If this fails, students should be encouraged to report chronic shirkers to the instructor.

The second method of dealing with the free rider issue is through team and self-assessment. At the conclusion of the project, students should grade their own performance and that of their teammates. Good assessment tools typically contain some numeric evaluation, which can be easily quantified, along with a written evaluation, where students can explain their numeric scores. The purpose of the assessments is really to catch any serious free-rider issues that were not caught in the monitoring process. If students understand that the assessments can impact grades they typically take them fairly seriously. Of course there is a natural tendency for many students to grade themselves "generously", but this can usually be caught quite easily by benchmarking against their team's scores.

CONCLUSION

Real world consulting projects have a variety of benefits for students. They can provide students with practical experience, increase their confidence, and improve their job prospects. There are many elements involved in a successful student consulting project. Among the most important are: selecting the right client-organization, having a good plan, and putting the students in position to succeed. One of the easiest and most effective ways to help ensure student success is by matching their talents and strengths to the tasks that are necessary for the project. The use of a strengths assessment tool like the Clifton StrengthsFinder is one way to do this.

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APPENDIX A
BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE 34 THEMES OF TALENT MEASURED BY THE CLIFTON STRENGTHSFINDER

(Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2009).

Achiever   People especially talented in the Achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive.

Activator   People especially talented in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient.

Adaptability   People especially talented in the Adaptability theme prefer to "go with the flow." They tend to be "now" people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.

Analytical   People especially talented in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.

Arranger   People especially talented in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements this ability. They like to figure out how all of the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.

Belief   People especially talented in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. Out of these values emerges a defined purpose for their life.

Command   People especially talented in the Command theme have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.

Communication   People especially talented in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters.

Competition   People especially talented in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.

Connectedness   People especially talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason.

Consistency   People especially talented in the Consistency theme are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat everyone in the world with consistency by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.

Context   People especially talented in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.

Deliberative   People especially talented in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate the obstacles.

Developer   People especially talented in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.

Discipline   People especially talented in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.

Empathy   People especially talented in the Empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others' lives or others' situations.

Focus   People especially talented in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, then act.

Futuristic   People especially talented in the Futuristic theme are inspired by the future and what could be. They inspire others with their visions of the future.

Harmony   People especially talented in the Harmony theme look for consensus. They don't enjoy conflict; rather, they seek areas of agreement.

Ideation   People especially talented in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.

Includer   People especially talented in the Includer theme are accepting of others. They show awareness of those who feel left out, and make an effort to include them.

Individualization   People especially talented in the Individualization theme are intrigued with the unique qualities of each person. They have a gift for figuring out how people who are different can work together productively.

Input   People especially talented in the Input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.

Intellection   People especially talented in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity.   They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.

Learner   People especially talented in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.

Maximizer   People especially talented in the Maximizer theme focus on strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something especially talented into something superb.

Positivity   People especially talented in the Positivity theme have an enthusiasm that is contagious.   They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do.

Relator   People who are especially talented in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others.   They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.

Responsibility   People especially talented in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.

Restorative   People especially talented in the Restorative theme are adept at dealing with problems.   They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.

Self-Assurance   People especially talented in the Self-Assurance theme feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right.

Significance   People especially talented in the Significance theme want to be very important in the eyes of others.   They are independent and want to be recognized.

Strategic   People especially talented in the Strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed.   Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.

Woo   People especially talented in the Woo theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with another person.

Bestselling Books Based on the Clifton StrengthsFinder		
Title	**Authors**	**Copyright**
How Full Is Your Bucket? Expanded Anniversary Edition	Rath & Clifton	2009
Strengths Based Leadership	Rath & Conchie	2009
StrengthsFinder 2.0	Rath	2007
Teach With Your Strengths	Liesveld, Miller, & Robison	2005
How Full Is Your Bucket? Positive Strategies for Work and Life	Rath & Clifton	2004
Living Your Strengths	Winseman, Clifton, & Liesveld	2004
Discover Your Sales Strengths	Smith & Rutigliano	2003
StrengthsQuest	Clifton & Anderson	2002
Now, Discover Your Strengths	Buckingham & Clifton	2001

APPENDIX C
THE FOUR DOMAINS OF LEADERSHIP STRENGTH
(Rath & Conchie, 2009)

The Four Domains of Leadership Strength			
Executing	**Influencing**	**Relationship Building**	**Strategic Thinking**
Achiever Arranger Belief Consistency Deliberative Discipline Focus Responsibility Restorative	Activator Command Communication Competition Maximizer Self-Assurance Significance Woo	Adaptability Developer Connectedness Empathy Harmony Includer Individualization Positivity Relator	Analytical Context Futuristic Ideation Input Intellection Learner Strategic