INTEGRATING ENTREPRENEURSHIP, BUSINESS PLANNING, AND SERVICE-LEARNING: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR BUSINESS PLAN COMPOSITION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

The following exercise describes the Bond University Business Plan Training Program. The program is grounded in entrepreneurship concepts and uses a teaching design called service-learning. The program was created as a partnership between the local Chamber of Commerce and Bond University with the aim of increasing sustainable economic development in the local community as well as student learning via real-world application of classroom-based knowledge. The exercise can be used in either business planning or entrepreneurship courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

KEY WORDS: Service-Learning, entrepreneurship, community engagement, business owner training programs

INTRODUCTION

SERVICE-LEARNING AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A PERFECT PEDAGOGICAL FIT

In this paper, it is purported that there is a “perfect pedagogical fit” between service-learning and entrepreneurship. This “fit” was used as the foundation for the Bond University Business Plan Training Program. In order to effectively describe the program, both service-learning and entrepreneurship must first be defined. Service-learning is examined first, including a description of current research constraints in the domain. Entrepreneurship is defined second, including a discussion of why entrepreneurship and, more specifically, business planning are topic areas through which both university and community needs can effectively and sustainably be addressed.

What is service-learning? Service-learning is a teaching tool grounded in university/community partnership projects. Service-learning projects “combine needed tasks in the community with intentional learning goals and with conscious reflection” [Kendall, 1990, p.20]; at its most fundamental level, service-learning is a teaching tool grounded in the development of partnerships [Jacoby, 2003]. Although the term “partnerships” necessitates a minimum of two parties, research in the service-learning domain has tended to focus almost solely on one side of the partnership - students. For example, engagement in service-learning projects has been shown to increase students’ commitment to service [McCarthy & Tucker, 2002] and leadership [Giles & Eyler, 1994], preparedness for careers [Gray, Ondaatje, & Fricker, 2000], pro-social decision making, reasoning, and exploration of occupational identity issues [Batchelder & Root, 1994], personal growth, self-esteem and personal efficacy [Primavera, 1999], and commitment to social justice and social change [Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000]. Yet, research on the benefits of service-learning to community-based organizations, has remained largely unexamined [Bushouse, 2005].
In their much talked about paper, Enos and Morton [2003], identified a framework for campus-community partnership development over time. The continuum starts with what they have termed “transactional” one time events and projects and ends with “transformational” programs resulting in joint knowledge and work creation. Using this framework, Bushouse [2005] examined which type(s) of partnerships non-profit organizations were most interested in and found that, because of resource constraints (e.g., staff time), 64% of the organizations she sampled were only interested in transactional projects (the remaining 36% were open to longer term, more sustained engagements). A second way of conceptualizing a service-learning partnership program is that of Dorado and Giles [2004]. They discuss three ‘paths of engagement’ for university and community service partnerships: tentative, aligned, and committed. Tentative engagements are those where “learning behaviors are dominant” and “partners are not interested in building a sustainable relationship” [p.30]. Engagements are aligned when partners “seek to create a better fit between their goals” [p.31]; it is a path that most partners will not remain on long, as they either transition to a committed partnership or dissolve their work together. Finally, the committed path of engagement represents those partnerships involving “actions and interactions that denote that partners value the partnership beyond the departing project” [p.31]. The program described in this exercise, the Bond University Business Plan Training Program, is transformational by design, and follows a committed path of engagement.

The focus of the program is entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship theory “focuses on how to create and grow businesses through the discovery and exploitation of opportunities to bring into existence future goods and services” [Shepherd, 2004; p.274]. Within the domain of entrepreneurship, falls the category of opportunity identification (i.e., an individual’s ability to discover opportunities where others do not), which Ardichvili, Cardozo, and Ray [2003] purport is one of the most important skills of successful entrepreneurs. It comes as no surprise that entrepreneurs and business owners want to develop this skill. On a positive note, DeTienne and Chandler [2004] found that training in this area increased individuals’ abilities to generate more ideas about business opportunities and their innovativeness. The Bond University Business Plan Training Program is based on the premise that opportunity identification can be learned, and that local business owners and entrepreneurs are the perfect partners for a university-based, community-needs-oriented training program.

**BUSINESS PLAN TRAINING PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

**PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

The Bond University Business Plan Training Program was created to be a sustainable, replicable, and ongoing program. It is a five-session program, covering four topic areas over four nights with one presentation and awards night, spanning six weeks. The four topic areas included in the program are:

1. The ‘What’ and ‘Why’ of Business Planning;
2. The ‘Where’ and ‘How’ of Business Planning;
3. Owning Your Business Plan; and
4. Wrap it up and Sell It.

The last session, held during week six, is a presentations and awards night. During this session, participants perform a five-minute “elevator pitch” to a panel of judges consisting of venture funders, faculty involved in the program, and representative members from the community partner organization, the local Chamber of Commerce.

Each program has a target of sixteen participants with a cap of twenty. The first program, run in early 2006, filled almost immediately. For each program, every participant pays a small fee to attend; fees cover incidental costs (awards, drinks and nibbles on awards night) with all remaining monies going toward a scholarship for a university student in the name of the partner organization, the Chamber of Commerce.

**PROGRAM GOALS**

The program itself has two primary goals, (1) increasing opportunities for student learning and (2) improving local economic development through University-community partnering. Based on the premise that “service-learning and partnerships are two sides of the same coin” [Baillis, 2000, p.5], this program
was designed to deliver tangible and immediate benefits to both involved organizations. The Chamber of Commerce provides a much-needed service for its members and the University provides a genuine, current, real-world-based learning opportunity to its students. As student learning is a university’s first priority, and experiential learning provides the highest levels of learning for students (through hands-on experiences and application), this type of program creates an opportunity for students to maximize their learning through interactions with real-world practitioners facing real-world needs. Through this program, students are required to examine theoretical components through the lens of real-world applicability. Learning becomes more than simple rote memorization, it takes on a fluid “in-the-moment” characteristic. This is because the ultimate success of the planning program is dependent upon the creation of a “fit” between material presented and the participating business owners’ needs. Often, creating this type of “fit” requires constantly adapting material, revising examples, and answering tough questions. Students are required to think on their feet, and to continuously adapt theory to practice – an exercise that develops their cognitive skills and prepares them for the intricacies of post-graduation working life.

Another goal of this program is to connect the university and local businesses. As members of the same community, the university, the Chamber of Commerce, and all of the involved business owners have a vested interest in open lines of communication and joint efforts for sustainable economic development. It is in everyone’s best interest to have a strong local economy.

PROGRAM CREATION

BACKGROUND TO THE PARTNERSHIP

The Chamber of Commerce is a key player in this endeavor. In fact, the President of the local Chamber of Commerce was the catalyst for this program. The President has maintained contact with the university through a monthly invitation to a local business breakfast (100-150 members usually attend). Breakfasts provide opportunities for networking and hearing about a “business success story” from a guest speaker. The university almost always sends members (e.g., the Dean, Associate Deans, faculty members, students) to the breakfast to show support and commitment to the local community.

At one such breakfast, the President of the Robina Varsity Chamber of Commerce and the organizer for “Coast Commerce” (a group of Chambers working together), Wayne Atkinson, asked the Dean of the Faculty of Business, Technology and Sustainable Development, Garry Marchant, if Bond University would be willing to run a business plan training program for its business owner members. Many of the members of the Chamber were interested in expanding their businesses, but had never written a business plan and did not know what issues they needed to address as they moved forward toward expansion. Dean Marchant took the idea back to the Faculty, and asked the Associate Dean of Teaching & Learning (Amy Kenworthy-U’Ren) and faculty who teach business plan courses in the Entrepreneurship area (Dell McStay and Baden U’Ren) to investigate the possibility of creating such a program.

RESOURCES INVESTED IN THE PROGRAM

Chamber of Commerce Resources

As a partner in this endeavor, the local Chamber of Commerce was responsible for the marketing of the program. The Chamber began advertising the program four months in advance through announcements in its monthly newsletters and at its monthly breakfasts. At one of the breakfasts, a participating faculty member, Baden U’Ren, was invited to say a few words about Bond University and the upcoming program. Chamber organizers served as the first point of contact for interested participants, answering questions and funnelling information to the Associate Dean of Teaching & Learning at the University. The Chamber organizers informed all of the participants of the logistics (e.g., directions to campus, date/time and location information) and sent a participant list to the University.

Bond University Resources

Bond University also contributed a number of resources to the program. A majority of the contributions from the University came from three faculty members who invested time in the creation, logistical organization, and execution of the program. The involved faculty created the program overview
and then prepared each session (including homework for the participants, PowerPoint slides, group exercises, and discussion questions). Program logistics also had to be organized (e.g., scheduling classrooms, preparing niceties for the final session (e.g., drinks and nibbles, awards, certificates), distributing directions and location information, booking the Dean for a first session “welcome,” and securing commitment from local venture fund managers to attend the last session as judges). Two of the faculty members alternated sessions as lead facilitators; this role included overseeing the facilities operation (e.g., checking that technology was working, rooms were cleaned). Each of the three involved faculty members also oversaw the integration of this program into their respective courses or student organizations. Amy Kenworthy-U’Ren involved students from her Negotiation course via service-learning projects with the training program. Baden U’Ren incorporated students from his Business Planning course. And Dell McStay included students from “Students in Free Enterprise” (SIFE), a student-led community economic development organization, in the program.

OUTCOMES

BUSINESS OWNER OUTCOMES

The outcomes of the program were high levels of satisfaction for all involved parties. The business owners gave the program an overall rating of 1.3 out of 5 (where 1=excellent and 5=poor). After only two of the four sessions, the Chamber of Commerce President, Wayne Atkinson, had received unsolicited calls from almost all of the participants stating: (1) how much they were enjoying the sessions, (2) how much important information they were learning, and (2) how impressed they were with Bond University and the Chamber for organizing the event. One participant went so far as to say that he wished the sessions ran three nights per week instead of one (a powerful statement for a busy business owner to make). Another business owner stated, “this program opened my eyes to a different way of viewing my business… I feel much more prepared to move forward in an informed way now.”

STUDENT OUTCOMES

The students involved in the program made equally positive statements. Students from the Negotiation class had the task of presenting the training section on persuasion (in the final “wrap it up and sell it” session). This task included researching, designing, presenting, and debriefing session content. Following the presentation, students wrote essays about their experiences. One of the most salient themes emerging from these reflections was the level of emotion that students expressed about their work. Students reported feeling anxious, excited, and challenged, primarily because it was a real-world project with real-world consequences (i.e., they succeeded or failed in their presentations to the business owners) and real-world feedback.

A team of students from the Business Planning class attended one of the training sessions to discuss their course-based business plan with the business owners. This was a particularly interactive session. The student team had just won the Australian business plan competition and was about to go to the U.S.A. to compete against teams from other countries.

The SIFE students attended all sessions. Guided by a faculty member of the entrepreneurship department, they assisted a community non-profit organization with the development of both a short- and long-term strategic expansion plan. Every student participating in the program rated it highly. Many students described the program as one of the highlights of their university experience. As one Negotiation-class student aptly summarized, “this project gave me an opportunity to deliver to business professionals what I learned in my course … doing that has given me enormous confidence in the relevance and importance of the skills I’ve learned and my ability to use them.”

ORGANIZATION-LEVEL OUTCOMES

At the successful completion of the trial training program, the Chamber of Commerce and the University decided to continue the program for three additional years. All of the involved constituents’ expectations were met or exceeded (as demonstrated in Outcomes above). However, as with many new initiatives, preparation for this program focused primarily on achieving first round success, with no
planning for future program iterations. As a result of this myopia, there are two major program-level challenges for continued growth: (1) staffing and (2) cross-disciplinary student involvement. With two training programs planned per year, each requiring a relatively high level of student involvement, new faculty had to be recruited to build this program into students’ class projects. For the next 2.5 years, the University plans to include students from courses in Organizational Behavior, Strategy, Marketing, Finance, Human Resource Management, and Creativity & Innovation in the design and running of the training program. To promote the program and increase cross-disciplinary faculty participation, the Bond University newsletter has run a cover story on the program and the Dean continues to publicly celebrate its success. The President of the Chamber of Commerce has also agreed to attend future faculty meetings to discuss and promote the program.

With a first round success in place, the Bond University Business Plan Training Program has entered a growth stage. As the age-old entrepreneurial saying goes, getting your business up and running is only the first step... the real challenge with any new initiative is effectively managing growth to ensure survival.

REFERENCES


**TEACHING NOTES**

**Exercise Title**
Service-Learning and a Business Plan Training Program

**Exercise Purpose and Learner Objectives**
The purpose of this exercise is sixfold:

1. to introduce students to the concept of service-learning in a way that sparks interest and personal involvement in them through a connection with their course(s),
2. to create a situation where students are required to evaluate and synthesize information from all aspects of their business planning course (as well as other courses they have taken) as they work toward solutions and outcomes,
3. to bring a real-world element into the course, with considerations of both university and community organization and constituent interests and constraints,
4. to encourage effective group work strategies as students either work in groups to discuss the program or prepare mini-presentations for each section of the program (optional),
5. to heighten students’ oral presentation skills through active presentation (optional), and
6. to prepare students for a real-world service-learning experience (optional, but recommended).

**Sequence of Learning**
The exercise is presented as appropriate for any business plan course at either the undergraduate or graduate level; it would also readily fit into most entrepreneurship courses. The sequence of learning for this exercise follows Sudzina’s [2005] case strategy facilitation guide: (1) discuss agenda for exercise including time allocations, (2) begin student reading, discussion/preparation, and presentation, (2) have students role play as presenters, (3) ask open-ended questions for presenters, (4) encourage active listening and request clarification where necessary, (5) compare and contrast session points, (6) provide positive feedback to each group, (7) summarize lessons learned and key themes from class discussion, and (8) close the session.

**Session Description**
The exercise should be introduced as an opportunity for students to engage in critical thinking, using the concepts learnt in the course and applying them to a real-world interaction between a university and a local community organization. The session time will be based upon the number of students in the course, and the faculty member’s decision to either ask the students to present each section of the business plan training program or simply run a whole class discussion about what the students think should be presented in each section. When the exercise is used with presentations, the format would be to give the program description to students in one class, break them up into presentation groups (there may be multiple groups per section), and then have the presentations run during the next course session. When
the exercise is used to elicit whole class discussion (without presentations), only one class session is needed.

Questions that can be presented to the students as they discuss the business plan program include (possible responses and discussion points are included in italics following each question):

(1) What are the benefits for each of the partner organizations, the university and the Chamber of Commerce, from this partnership program (both tangible and intangible)? What else could they do to encourage or create both short- or long-term benefit to the organizations?
Possible Responses: *University benefits (current & future)* – demonstrated commitment to the local community, potential students for their programs (both the business owners and their children), good word of mouth publicity for university (again, with the long term aim of generating revenue through students), contact with local businesspeople to remain abreast of local economic pressures and issues, business owners may serve as guest speakers for classes, scholarship for students through revenue generated, potential internship positions, site visits, and/or class projects at local businesses, possible business consulting opportunities for faculty through business owner contacts. *Chamber benefits (current & future)* – provide high quality needed business assistance for members at a very low cost (compared to taking a full course in business plan training) demonstrating responsiveness to members’ needs and interests, collaboration with local university is good for reputation, use of Ph.D. trained faculty as a resource for Chamber initiatives, potential board member and guest speaker contacts with faculty, teambuilding opportunity for members, sustainable program opportunity (the university is not going to leave and will continue the program if it is established as a partnership), good source of positive word-of-mouth about Chamber initiatives.

(2) What are the issues related to sustainability for both organizations and their respective constituents (i.e., students, faculty members, and business owners)?
Possible Responses: *Students* – students are constantly changing such that knowledge gained will need to be recorded to be passed along to future involved cohorts. *Faculty members* – again, faculty members may rotate out of teaching related courses, creating an issue of knowledge transference. Additionally, if this training program is run as a service component of faculty members’ university commitments then there may be a threshold to the amount that they are willing to give (time and resource constraints). *Business owners* – this is a “one off” service for the business owners, there is no “advanced” course for them. If they want more assistance then they will have to hire a faculty member as a personal consultant (expensive).

(3) What are the risks for the university with this program, particularly in terms of cost for the participants and the resources required by faculty members (assuming that the University has both MBA and EMBA programs)?
Possible Responses: The risks include providing a service for a very low cost that may be perceived as similar to a full unit course on business plan training (costing 20 times more for students enrolled in MBA and EMBA programs). While the course is not similar to the full program, perceptions may not reflect reality and that might hurt the programs’ reputations. As stated above, faculty members may not be willing to do unlimited amounts of service via these training programs creating constraints on availability of offerings and a real restriction to how often this program can be run.

(4) What types of involvement could students have in this program? What are the benefits and liabilities associated with student involvement for the university and the individual students?
Possible Responses: Students could readily be involved through business plan training courses as both designers of the content as presenters of the information. Students could also assist with the individual and team work components of the program (assuming that there are break out discussions run with the business owners during each session). Liabilities include student knowledge base and skills related to debriefing and discussion decision making issues with business owners. If students do not have the requisite skills to do this, then their involvement will
lower the perceived value of the program for its participants (the business owners). Preparation with students is a key component of program success.

(5) What courses, other than business planning, would be able to create service-learning projects that fit with this program? How would each of these projects be designed (e.g., one time or long term involvement, service or product provider)? What would students gain from their involvement? What would the university gain from their involvement? What would the Chamber of Commerce and the business owners gain from their involvement?

Possible Responses: Other courses that could involve students include: generic or introductory entrepreneurship courses (students could become involved in the first session and could run discussion groups); negotiation/persuasion and communications courses (to assist with the last session on presenting the business idea “wrap it up and sell it”); marketing courses (with the marketing session), finance courses (finance section), and strategy and competitive intelligence courses (with strategic and environmental analyses sections). Responses related to benefits tie in with those listed above (question #1). It is important to note that there are a large number of possible service-learning projects stemming from this program; it may be useful to spend some time with students on this topic to encourage a multi-disciplinary and integrated examination of this case.

(6) Would you like to be involved in this type of real-world interactive program? How long should “our” program run for (i.e., how many sessions) and how much credit should the project be worth for you as students? What are the risks and benefits to you?

Possible Responses: This set of questions will lead you into personal reflection with your students. It is important for students to begin to put themselves into the shoes of others who are actually doing this. What would this mean for them if they were involved? How would this impact their learning and resource commitments to the course? What are their interest levels (and why)? In this section, it is important to start with the risks and then move into the benefits. If the benefits are the last topic discussed, it will help to create a seamless shift into the introduction of a “live case” for your students. Not only are they able to reflect on this type of experience – you are providing them the opportunity to fully engage and learn from one.

Assessment

As a teaching tool, it is important to assess the success of this exercise in meeting student learning objectives. Faculty using Blackboard or WebCT could require students to post debrief comments onto a discussion board, encouraging strings of conversations among students. Additionally, in a similar vein to what was recommended by Malone and Salzman [2005], faculty who are limited to in-class interaction could prepare a questionnaire with a Likert-type question(s) assessing the overall success of the exercise at addressing learning objectives (one question per applicable learning objective) as well as two short essay questions asking the students what they learned from the program discussion and what they think could have been done better in terms of learning.

Conclusion

This exercise was designed to either be used on its own for in-class program analysis or, ideally, to serve as preparation and contextualization for an upcoming service-learning project. Most Chambers of Commerce are interested in programs that advance the skills of their constituents, particularly programs that are housed in a local college or university. If the cost of the program is predominantly absorbed by the university, as a form of community investment and goodwill, then the Chamber and its members have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Student learning will be deeply enhanced by the real-world pressure to perform (as designers and co-presenters of information with the respective faculty member(s)) as well as the contacts made and discussions that take place with local business owners. The signal to the local community is that the university is a strong and contributing member – a member that is engaged and committed to economic development and partner program sustainment.
Coast Commerce Business Planning Program 2006

organised in partnership with

Bond University Faculty of Business, Technology and Sustainable Development

This business plan training program is designed for small and medium size business owners who are interested in growing, expanding or refining their businesses.

This program is the first of its kind for Coast Commerce. It is a hands-on business plan training program where everyone participates and everyone has something to show at the end of the program. There are five sessions in this program. In the first four sessions, participants create business-specific sections of business plans. In the last session, participants present their business plans in a fun, yet informative, business plan competition. The program will run during March and April and will be held at Bond University. There is only space for 20 business owner participants so register early!

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