Experiential Learning through a Social Media Analysis Project in a Distance Learning Class

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Abstract

Using innovative education methods to spur student understanding, as well as knowledge, skills and ability development, is a critical component in today's technology laden academic and business environments. This paper outlines experiential learning through the development and usage of a social media analysis student project in a distance learning class, where such environmental factors are especially critical. Its purpose was to provide students with a hands-on opportunity, through technology mediated processes, to understand social media design fundamentals. Of additional importance was enhancement of their understanding of best practices for social media usage in the bigger picture context of an organization's website.

Keywords: distance learning, experiential learning, social media, innovative education

1.0 Introduction

Distance Learning is an increasingly important component in academia, as it provides a structure from which knowledge and skill development occurs through technology mediated learning forms at a distance (United States Distance Learning Association, 2013). Distance learning offers flexibility to students in when and where they study, lowers class participation and transportation costs, and can be more compatible with the learning styles of certain students than traditional onsite course delivery, among other benefits (Young, Hasler and Sanders, 2008). Independence from geography and time constraints facilitates greater access to higher education (Swan and Shin, 2003). Such an on demand learning approach appears to be significantly influential in management skill development processes (Armstrong and Sadler-Smith, 2008). Although distance learning has had its detractors, positives appear to far outweigh negatives (Redpath, 2010), with higher education distance learning course offers growing at a near explosive pace.

Experiential learning is a hands-on approach to knowledge and skill development. Experiential learning exercises and projects offer students a direct encounter with a real situation that may be experienced in a particular business environment, and are more effective in student knowledge and skill development that simply reading about the experiences of others (McCarthy and McCarthy, 2006). Experiential learning can bridge learning spaces across learning environments (Kolb and Kolb, 2005), and has been found to be particularly useful in entrepreneurial learning (Howorth, Smith and Parkinson, 2012) and management education in general (Kayes, 2002).

While experiential learning experiences may be intuitively easier to deliver in a traditional, face to face classroom, distance learning students should also be exposed to such experiences. In this short overview, we will inform about the development of this experiential learning project; the general results as it applies to student growth in these areas; and how the project can be developed and implemented by professors for usage in classes such as the Principles of EBusiness of original use or in a number of others, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

2.0 Development of the Website Analysis Project

Information technology is an increasingly critical component of management education (Alavi and Gallupe, 2003). This website analysis project is especially well suited for distance learning classes where much work is by nature technologically driven. This social media analysis project was first developed as a student activity project in an undergraduate Principles of EBusiness distance learning class taught completely online. All students had completed core business classes across functional areas, and most were studying at the senior level. The initial purpose was to expose students to social media tool usage in large successful companies, with the intention of understanding what this usage "looked" like in practice and how it might be applied elsewhere, hence the experiential approach.

The project's first launch revealed that there was indeed a need for analysis and student learning beyond that of how organizations successfully used or might use social media tools. Social media is not employed as stand-alone tools utilized in isolation, but are an integral part of an organization's website. In addition to the originally investigated social media tool usage, subsequent semesters allowed an opportunity to expand the student project to include understanding best practices in several areas related to an organization's website including its URL as well as homepage design and content. Survey Monkey was employed to create the primary data collection instrument used by students in this project. This instrument is available from the first author. Students were assigned to analyze websites of Inc. Top 40 businesses (2012) for best practices in four key areas: the homepage, url, social media tools and content. Students worked independently and were assigned specific businesses to analyze, using the predetermined parameters represented in the Survey Monkey questionnaire. A total of six hundred observations were collected.

3.0 General Results and Student Growth

A summary of collected data was used to determine best practices in the identified key areas. Students then determined how these best practices compared to what developing, entrepreneurial firms might reasonably benefit from, especially in the ever growing area of social media. Group discussions were set up in the form of observations being posted about the process of the project as well as content of the results. Students were required to respond with their understanding of this process and content, as well as suggestions on how these results might apply to entrepreneurial firms who likely did not have the rich resource base of many of the larger organizations of study.

Throughout the project, students were exposed to not only the real time usage of social media and other components of an organizations website, but also developed a feel for best practices and how these practices might apply in other businesses. The use of Survey Monkey exposed the students to survey design principles, as well as data gathering techniques. Finally, the use of blogs and group assignments provided the opportunity to analyze social media practices within the larger context of an organization's website. By understanding social media and related website components utilized by large, resource rich organizations, a best practices approach was developed for use by small, entrepreneurial firms, especially startups or those first engaging in social media usage.

4.0 How This Project Can Be Flexibly Implemented

This project was specifically designed for use in a distance learning class where students often use technology to work independently. However, there is great flexibility in building on this first level exercise, both within the type of class of original use, or other related or higher level classes. While this analysis project focused on Inc. Top 40 companies, it could simply be adapted for use in social media analysis of a particular industry. Further, groups of students could be assigned to evaluate different industries, and compare the results as part of a second order project. An international component could also be introduced by specifically studying multinational firms, groups of firms from country to country, or specific industries within a country or region of interest.

For more advanced students (e.g., graduate or a second ebusiness class) this project can be adapted for many applications. The resulting database of this analysis of well-know companies (or any other resulting database) could easily be enhanced with many dimensions of potential interest and study. Data from a secondary source could be introduced, such as reputation measures (e.g., Standard & Poors), specific Compustat data of interest, and the like. Students could also be assigned to write up reports of findings, or to do more in-depth statistical analysis of collected data, such as model building of important best practices.

This could then be applied to analyze how other firms compare to this best practices model on important metrics of social media tool usage, or other website design parameters.

5.0 Conclusions

Methodology employed in the classroom increasingly requires introduction of techniques that enhance student understanding of how technology can be used to gather important data, as well as best business practices in a technologically rich environment. This may be particularly true in distance learning classes. We demonstrate an experiential learning application in this brief overview of a student project where Survey Monkey was employed to explore how large firms deploy social media tools and usage, as well as other facets of an organization's website such as url specifics, content and design. This could then be utilized to understand what practices could be useful for small, entrepreneurial firms. The project can readily be altered to explore such topics in other industries, as well as be adapted to higher order learning, such as including other dimensions of interest or usage in model building. Implementation of innovative educational methods such as the project introduced here is of critical import in today's classroom, whether distance learning oriented or in a more traditional delivery.

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