Student Perspectives of Value Regarding an Experiential Learning Project Set in a Simulated Retail Environment

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Like other retail faculty, I (the primary researcher) chose to implement experiential learning projects in courses that I taught related to visual merchandising, and retail promotion and entrepreneurship. Such projects included service learning projects in which students would gain first-hand experience working within an actual retail space by redesigning the store’s exterior or interior space, rearranging store layouts and merchandise, and creating merchandise displays within the store or in store windows (Niehm, Fiore, Hurst, Lee, & Sadachar, 2015; Muske, et al., 2004). Similar experiential projects also included student-run businesses (Truman, Mason, & Venter, 2017) such as pop-up shops run as part of a retail promotion course (Burgess, 2012) and a continual online store run as part of a retail management course (Daly, 2001). These types of projects are favored as they are considered more concrete or active than simulations, which “provide valuable practice in problem solving and reinforce course content,” but “often pertain to lower level applications of content in controlled situations that are ordered and manipulated by the professor” (Burgess, 2012, p. 284). An example of a simulation is the use of the virtual reality game “Second Life” “to simulate a real-world experience” (Ashley, Kibbe, & Thornton, 2014) by having the students create retail stores and perform the same activities online as they would within a physical store, which included creating a retail concept (identifying target market, merchandise mix, store design) and creating it within the game, as well as creating merchandise displays, providing customer service, completing transactions, tracking sales, and evaluating their performance (p. 94). While my students valued aspects of the hands-on experiential service-learning projects in an actual retail space, their satisfaction with the projects was often impacted by external factors such as the inability to complete projects due to unexpected store closures, failure of on-site supervisors to assign the students meaningful projects, and/or limiting the tasks students were allowed to complete, thereby hindering their ability to demonstrate the skills they had learned throughout the course. These factors, coupled with an invitation to partner with the University’s retail research lab, which contained a store setup complete with a cash wrap station and dressing rooms, provided me with an opportunity to design a project in which my students could create and implement a new store concept with near-complete autonomy and eliminate the external factors that often impact project satisfaction.

This project was unique from others previously reported in research in that it was set in a lab with a simulated retail environment. The purpose of this project was to provide students with a realistic learning experience in a simulated retail environment without the disadvantages and uncertainties of a real-world retail environment resulting in student perceptions of value. The project consisted of three stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. In the planning stage, students visited the lab to measure the space and to take inventory of available fixtures, mannequins, and furniture. They were also asked to design a unique store concept with a store...
name and logo, as well as a new floor layout using SketchUp, a 3D modeling software program, and planograms for fixtures and interior displays using Photoshop. The implementation stage of the project included setting up the new floor layout and dressing fixtures according to the planograms the students designed. The evaluation stage of the project was one in which the students visited the lab and individually evaluated the effectiveness of the store layout by comparing their traffic patterns with concepts concerning visual merchandising effectiveness discussed in lecture and evaluated the effectiveness of merchandise displays using the principles of design (balance, contrast, proportion, rhythm, etc.).

The project was designed under the assumption that the more realistic the learning experience, the more students would perceive it as valuable. Therefore, The Generic Scale of Learning Typologies (Bergsteiner, Avery, & Neumann, 2010), which demonstrates the “perceived ‘reality’ of an experience from a learner’s perspective” (Bergsteiner, Avery, & Neumann, 2010, p. 39), served as a framework for this research. Using a mixed methods convergent parallel research design, quantitative seven-point Likert-Scale survey data and qualitative data from student reflection papers were simultaneously collected from 39 students (37 undergraduate and 2 graduate) and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (quantitative) and NVivo Qualitative Coding software.

Students demonstrated perceived understanding and application of visual merchandising concepts, perceived application of the project to a career in retail, project satisfaction, and attitude toward project by indicating high percent agreement with survey statements related to these variables. For example, ninety percent of students agreed with two survey statements relating to project satisfaction: “Overall this project was a positive learning experience for me” and “I am satisfied with this project,” as well as one statement relating to attitude toward the project, “This project was useful.” Student reflections provided a deeper understanding to survey responses while also highlighting connections between the variables and students perceived reality of the learning experience. Project satisfaction was linked to attitude toward the project, wherein the project was viewed as useful, which was in turn connected to the perceived application of the project to a career in retail and applicability/similarity to an actual retail store. Students found that the hands-on (more concrete, active, realistic) aspects of the project, which included learning and using software programs related to store planning were useful because they felt these aspects prepared them for a career in retail and were applicable to real-world retail environments. For example, Participant #3, wrote:

I really enjoyed getting to plan a store concept. I always knew it would take a good bit of work to come up with a store, but I never realized it would be that detailed and thought-through. It was an awesome experience to get to go through. It was nice to be able to actually plan it in real life. It gave me help for the future when I actually do get to create my own store from scratch.

This project was designed for continual implementation. However, implementation varies based on the instructor assigned to the course within a teaching rotation. Revisions to the project are necessary to increase student perceptions of value. In their reflection papers, students frequently suggested to reduce the number of students working on the project or “divide the
group in half and having two lab sections” (Participant # 19). The large number of people involved in the project reduced students’ perceived reality of the experience, as noted by Participant # 25, “I feel like it very much simulated a real-world experience, except in the real-world way less people usually go into business together to open a store.” Not only was the large number of people unrealistic, it made collaboration among groups challenging. For example, Participant # 19 explained that dividing the course into two sections would “ensure everyone is agreeing on ideas and it might make it a little easier when it comes to communication.” Ironically, due to an influx in student enrollment the semester this project was implemented, the course cap was expanded to more than double its usual enrollment. A cap of 20 students for studio/lab courses like this one is recommended to implement experiential learning projects and to ensure favorable student perceptions of value and project satisfaction.

References