Getting Real: A Student Perspective on Benefits and Challenges of Incorporating Industry Projects into the Classroom

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Learning through industry collaborations in classroom activities is critical in decreasing the gap between the real world and the academic environment. Challenges drawn from industry can increase student knowledge and future employability (Collins, Curtis, Curtis & Stevenson, 2007; Cox & King, 2006; Fleischmann, 2011). Yet, most academic programs focus largely on increasing student cognitive skills and few incorporate activities using industry collaborations (Fleischmann, 2011). Such collaborations are especially critical for industry-based majors, such as textiles and apparel. This is particularly crucial given research findings that academic curricula largely lack "an integration of both industry and the academy" (Wright, Cushman & Nicholson, 2002, p. 122).

Students benefit from industry collaborations as they can be assured that what they learn is highly related to the real world, which allows them to make more informed decisions upon graduation (Hirsch, Anderson, Colgate, Lake, Shwom, & Yarnoff, 2002). Including industry collaborations into academic curriculum encourages reflective thinking and increases problem-solving skills (Cox & King, 2006; Wright, et al., 2002). It can also increase student teamwork and communication skills, particularly ways to effectively communicate with clients (Fleischmann, 2011; Hirsch, et al., 2002).

There appears a strong need to rebuild the relevance of college education in order to provide students with the skills and abilities required in industry (Wright, et al., 2002). One way to achieve this is through greater engagement of industry in student education (Collins, et al., 2007). Despite obvious benefits of industry-based learning activities, little research has examined student perceptions of such collaborations. This study explored student perceptions of benefits and challenges of working with industry projects as part of a course assignment.

Faculty members in an apparel program teaching a Creative Thinking and Problem Solving course collaborated with Payless Shoesource, a large U.S. shoe company, to develop projects that allowed students to apply creative thinking strategies to solve real-world problems. Students in the course were drawn from the apparel, events, and hospitality majors and had one month to complete and present the projects. The projects involved redesign of packaging (shoebox, hosiery, and scarves) and required: (a) researching industry's typical and best practices related to the presented problem and writing a brief report; (b) developing an innovative solution to address the problem; (c) producing a prototype; (d) addressing costing, transportation, and display issues in a final report; and (e) presenting the project's outcomes to the company representatives. Students worked in teams of 2-3 people. Weekly reflection journals from two semesters with a total enrollment of 110 students were collected and analyzed. Theme analysis was conducted to better understand student perceptions regarding the project.

The analysis showed that students perceived that working on an industry-presented challenge had both benefits and challenges. All students agreed that working on a "real" industry problem gave more meaning to the project and learning outcomes. As a result, many students reported taking the assignment more seriously, investing greater effort, and were more motivated to deliver quality outcomes. Students appreciated opportunity to interact with industry professionals while working on the project. Further, students stated that prior knowledge learned within the classroom setting was now given relevance.

In comparison with non-industry based assignments, the project proved to be a challenge for some students, particularly for those who felt greater pressure to perform and "impress" company representatives. Students commented that it was "nerve wracking" and "intimidating" to be "judged" by industry professionals as opposed by course instructors when presenting the project outcomes. Another challenge was that industry-presented problems were broader and more complex in nature (required extensive research on various related topics) than typical academic assignments. Moreover, because the problems were complex, there was no obvious "right" answer and, at the end, there might be no "perfect" or "final" solution found to solve the problem, but rather different opportunities explored that might potentially solve the problem. However, precisely because the problems were challenging, they stimulated student critical and creative thinking as well as analytical skills. Even though the creative thinking and problem solving course emphasized generating as many unique and original ideas as possible to effectively solve a problem, the real-world often has limitations including costs, logistics, and client needs that students felt limited their creativity.

Student quotes and pictures of prototypes included in presentation to illustrate the project learning outcomes. The course instructors plan to continue working with the company and develop new projects to further enhance student experiences and learning outcomes. The company representatives found students ideas interesting and useful.

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