

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS WITH PURPOSE: SERVICE LEARNING IN GRADUATE BUSINESS EDUCATION

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Abstract

Problem: This non-experimental, mixed-methods, comparative, descriptive study examined outcomes of students' development of employability skills through service-learning participation in capstones embedded in MBA programs and assessed whether the inclusion of service learning influences students' development of employability skills. **Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to examine the alignment between the employability skills employers need and the employability skills that graduate business students gain through service learning in business capstones. **Method:** Quantitative data explored which employability skills were enhanced by service learning in business capstones and whether there were differences in gender and GPA. Qualitative data were analyzed through semi-structured interviews from ten MBA graduates. **Findings:** The top three employability skills enhanced were decision making, presentation skills, and teamwork. Of these three, presentation skills was statistically significant, meaning capstones that had service learning enhanced presentation skills more than capstones that did not include service learning. Qualitative data revealed four themes: (1) Structure and Deliverables of Capstones; (2) Opportunities to Make Decisions; (3) Opportunities to Build Teamwork Skills; and, (4) Opportunities to Build Presentation Skills. **Conclusions:** There is alignment in the collaborative learning skills needed by employers and those skills enhanced through service learning in graduate business capstones, the instructor's role in structuring and facilitating service learning is a key to learning, and presentation skills are enhanced during client-based business capstone courses that include service learning.

Introduction

Many experiential pedagogies can be used to accomplish purposeful work in business course content, such as authentic projects (Roach-Duncan, 2010; Slavkin, 2004) and internships (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). In addition to these pedagogies, service learning has also proven to be a useful experiential pedagogy that deepens the course content of a business program in many ways. For example, service learning impacts the personal and social outcomes of students, positively affecting students' sense of personal satisfaction (Wittmer, 2004) and the various ways they engage with their communities, faculty, and peers (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Bringle and Hatcher (1999) emphasized that service learning is. . .

a course or competency-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in mutually identified service activities that

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benefit the community, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (p. 222).

Service learning has proven to positively impact academic outcomes, including increased content knowledge and skills (Prentice & Robinson, 2010) and improved higher order thinking skills (Eyler & Giles, 1999). In addition to academic outcomes, service learning has been shown to positively affect civic outcomes such as students' sense of social responsibility and citizenship skills (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Prentice & Robinson, 2010) and their commitment to service (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Marcus, Howard, & King, 1993; Prentice & Robinson, 2010).

Outcomes related to students' careers have also shown to be affected by service learning. For example, service learning provides students with skills such as teamwork and leadership that benefit them in their careers; (Prentice & Robinson, 2010) and in some cases, even alter their career aspirations (Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2011).

Service learning is increasingly recognized as a legitimate approach to business education, and researchers argue that "the value of direct, unsimulated experience cannot be overlooked" (Zlotkowski, 1996, p. 8). Although proven outcomes exist, service-learning experiences are used less in business disciplines than other instructional methods; and the research related to how service learning impacts employability skills of business students is scarce. In one study of over 864 capstone courses taught at 707 American colleges and universities that offered upper-division courses, when the course was a business management course, the most frequent instructional component (84%) of the capstone was a major project. For the most part these projects did not involve any real-world experiences such as service learning or internships (Henscheid, 2000).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to examine the alignment between the employability skills employers need and the employability skills that graduate business students gain through service learning in business capstones. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Are there differences in employability skills developed between [Master of Business Education] MBA students who participate in capstones that include service learning and comparable MBA students who participate in capstones that do not include service learning?

Sub-Research Question 1: Are there differences among various demographic groups in the extent to how their employability skills were enhanced?

Research Question 2: Which, if any, essential employability skills, as identified by employers, are enhanced by service-learning experiences in business capstones?

Research Question 3: Which aspects of service-learning experiences contribute to enhanced employability skills in graduate business students?

Methods

The research design for this study was a non-experimental, comparative, descriptive study. The study examined outcomes of students' development of employability skills through participation in service learning in MBA capstones. In particular, the study assessed whether capstones that include service learning influence students' development of employability skills in comparison to capstones that do not include service learning.

There were two groups. Group A consisted of alumni or students who completed a capstone in an MBA program that included a service-learning experience, and Group B consisted of alumni or students who completed a capstone in an MBA program that did not include a service-learning experience. Group A provided perceptions of which, if any, employability skills were enhanced by the service-learning component of the capstone. Group B's data provided perceptions of which, if any, employability skills students believed were influenced by their capstone.

The study utilized mixed methods and incorporated both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to offer various forms of data that addressed the research questions (Creswell, 2009). The quantitative method used survey research. Specifically, an existing instrument was used to test which, if any, of the essential employability skills that were identified by employers in the literature were enhanced by service-learning experiences. Once those results were obtained, the qualitative portion of the study began.

The population of interest was graduate business students who completed a capstone experience as part of their MBA program. In 2011 the greatest numbers of master's degrees awarded were in business (187,000), closely followed by education (185,000) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The graduate business education program that is most common worldwide is the Master of Business Administration (MBA). Historically, MBA programs have been widely respected both in academic circles and in business as a way to prepare leaders, to instill ethical values, and to teach useful skills. The sample for this study consisted of MBA students who completed a capstone as part of their MBA program. Participants were sought through professional electronic mailing lists, Google Groups that focus on service learning in higher education or MBA alumni, and LinkedIn groups that focus on service learning in higher education or MBA alumni.

Participants for the semi-structured interviews were determined through a survey. Respondents were asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed. Initially, 79 usable surveys were returned. Seventeen respondents said they would be willing to be interviewed; and ten ultimately agreed to be interviewed, which resulted in a 59 percent response rate.

Results

This study was composed of two measures/evaluations that best answered the research questions. The first instrument was a list of skills and attributes first used by Tanyel, Mitchell, and McAlum (1999). Their study sought answers to three issues: (1) skills and abilities prospective employers of entry-level business graduates desired, (2) skills and abilities faculty believed prospective employers desired of business graduates, and (3) agreement between prospective employers and faculty on the skills needed of new graduates. The current study expanded on the employability skills used in the Tanyel et al. 1999 study but should not be considered a replication of that study.

Quantitative Analysis

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which a list of 19 employability skills was enhanced during their MBA capstone course. Employability skills were measured on a scale of 1 (skill was not enhanced) to 7 (skill was greatly enhanced). The three skills reported to be enhanced the most during respondents' capstone course were decision-making (6.71), presentation skills (6.66), and ability to work in teams (6.65). The three skills reported as least enhanced during the capstone course were computer problem solving (4.27), computer word processing (4.57), and ability to assimilate new technology (4.75). A Mann-Whitney-U test was performed for the three skills reported to be enhanced the most (decision-making, presentation skills, and ability to work in teams) to determine if there were differences between students who had service learning in their capstones and those who did not. Results revealed a significant difference between the two groups only for presentation skills ($p = .003$). There was no significant difference for either decision making ($p = .212$) or the ability to work in teams ($p = .087$).

Sub-Research Question 1 asked: *Are there differences among various demographic groups in the extent to how their employability skills were enhanced?* While data were collected for several demographic characteristics, gender and overall GPA were chosen for analysis to see if these factors affected how employability skills were enhanced by service learning. Males comprised 53.8% of the respondents with GPAs ranging between 3.4 and 4.0 (93.7%). Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test for differences. Results showed that the only statistical significance, when the covariate gender was held constant, was for analytical ability ($p = .036$) and oral communication ($p = .014$). Thus, gender was shown to be significant for enhancement of analytical ability and oral communication during a service-learning experience in a business capstone course; however, the enhancement was greater for males than for females for both analytical ability and oral communication.

ANCOVA was completed for all 19 skills using the covariate overall GPA. All respondents said they either had an overall GPA in their MBA program in the range of 2.40-3.30 (6.3%), or 3.40-4.00 (93.7%). Results indicated significance

when the covariate was held constant for six of the skills: analytical ability ($p = .019$), oral communication ($p = .021$), presentation skill ($p = .003$), project management ($p = .030$), responsibility ($p = .024$), and time management ($p = .018$).

The 19 employability skills were analyzed to determine if factors were present using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The EFA provided an opportunity to reduce a large number of variables to a few factors by combining those that were moderately or highly correlated with each other. Results of the EFA, using the Pattern Matrix in the SPSS output, showed that four factors existed on the scale; and those factors accounted for 73% of the total variance. The Mann-Whitney-U result was highest for Factor 1 (44.81) and Factor 2 (36.65), and lowest for Factor 4 (13.26), which loaded only two variables. Cronbach's (1951) alpha was utilized for all four factors to determine internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha for Factor 1 was .939, and Cronbach's alpha for the other three factors was also strong. EFA results including the names of the factors, the skills that loaded into each factor, and the Cronbach's Alpha for each factor are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis with Promax Rotation

Factor Number/ Label	Number Of Items	Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
1: Collaborative Learning	7	ability to work in teams, oral communication, persuasive ability, presentation, project management, responsibility	.939
2: Technical & Organizational Awareness	7	ability to assimilate new technology, analytical ability, computer problem solving, computer word processing, ethical values, global awareness, punctuality	.848
3: Timely Written Communications	3	accountability, time management, written communications	.899
4: Making Creative Decisions	2	creativity and creative thinking, decision making	.749

Mann-Whitney-U was performed to compare the scores from Group A (service learning in capstone) and Group B (no service learning in capstone) to see if there were differences between students who had service learning in their capstones and those who did not. A significance value of $p < .05$ was used to determine any significant differences between the two groups. Table 2 shows the results of the Mann-Whitney-U test for the four factors. Results indicated that there was significance only for Factor 1: Collaborative Learning. Collaborative learning is enhanced for capstone students who have a service-learning experience more than students whose capstone does not include a service-learning experience.

Table 2

Significant Associations ($p < .05$) Between Factors and Service Learning vs. No Service Learning

Factor	Mean Rank		Mann-Whitney-U	z	p
	Service Learning	No Service Learning			
Collaborative Learning	46.53	34.19	479.000	-2.365	.018
Technological and Organizational Awareness	45.78	35.79	528.500	-1.883	.060
Timely Written Communications	45.28	36.77	576.500	-1.613	.107
Making Creative Decisions	44.00	37.55	615.000	-1.232	.218

Qualitative Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 survey respondents who indicated they would be interested in participating in the research. The 10 respondents represented three MBA programs. Two methods of qualitative data analysis were used: the constant comparative method and the content analysis method. Data saturation was achieved after the seventh interview, and three additional interviews were then conducted that revealed no new codes. The first research question asked: *Which aspects of service-learning experiences contributed to enhanced employability skills in graduate business students?* Results revealed the following four themes: (1) Structure and Deliverables of Capstone, (2) Opportunities to Make Decisions, (3) Opportunities to Build Teamwork Skills, and (4) Opportunities to Build Presentation Skills. How the capstone course was structured, the major deliverables of the course, and the professor's interaction with students all emerged as important aspects that could contribute to enhanced employability skills.

All 10 participants completed a capstone project for a community-based organization that they called their *client*, and the project was centered around a service-learning experience. The four aspects that were important to the structure and deliverables of the capstone were: (1) the capstone was summative, (2) the capstone used client-based and service-focused instructional methods, (3) major deliverables were a written report and multiple oral presentations, and (4) the professor's positive and/or negative interactions with students.

The top three characteristics of decision making identified through the data analysis were: collaborative decision making, process-oriented decision making, and client-focused decision making. While participants said some decisions

were individual decisions, they agreed that decision making was team based and collaborative. For the most part, teams were able to make decisions without conflict. All participants mentioned that decisions were made at various points throughout the capstone project. All ten participants had a client for which they conducted a group-based project. Seven projects focused on business planning, two focused on providing training, and one focused on providing marketing communication tools such as a web site or a blog.

The theme of decision making relates to the theme of teamwork; and since working as a small team was a course requirement, decisions were primarily made collaboratively. Four categories emerged from the theme *Opportunities to Build Teamwork Skills*, as shown in Table 3. The four categories were taken from Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development mode, which suggested that teams progress through a particular sequence of stages when working together. Teams were formed in one of two ways. In some cases the capstone course professor formed the capstone teams with little or no input from students; but in most cases, students formed their own teams.

Students who formed their own teams had, for the most part, worked on other team projects with the same members in other MBA courses. In the storming stage conflict often arises as individuals' personalities begin to emerge, and disagreements may occur regarding the required objectives and tasks. Not all teams experienced conflict; but when there was conflict, it came from two sources: the addition of a new team member to the group and issues surrounding project workload. Adding a new team member to an existing group caused conflict in three of the ten teams. Problems primarily involved communication. One participant commented:

. . .we had a unique group because the group had worked together for a year and a half. When you spend that much time together, you learn how the other individuals work. . . .after a year and a half, we had learned how to work well with one another. When this fourth member came on, it . . .[was] actually a disruption. This fourth member was very different from the rest of us . . . in terms of working style [and] communication style.

In addition to conflict that arose from students joining after a team had already formed, another source of team conflict was project workload; and three participants mentioned that project workload was a source of their team's conflict.

In the norming stage teams established group norms, or codes of behavior, that allowed them to work together to accomplish tasks. Even though many team members did not know each other prior to the capstone course, there was sometimes team conflict. However, collaboration did occur, which allowed teams to complete their projects. At least three participants spoke about this collaboration with fondness (Table 3). In the performing stage, teams are able to work together to accomplish tasks and solve problems. Teams that reach this stage have the highest potential to perform. Data analysis revealed that teams were able

to perform when they shared these three characteristics: team communication, team accountability, and a clear definition of roles.

Table 3
Participant Voices (Comments)

Theme	Categories	Participant (P) Voice
Opportunities to Make Decisions	Collaborative decision making, process-oriented decision making, client-focused decision making	(P1) "Decision making was a huge component for nearly every part of our project, from minor decisions to major ones, individual decisions, group decisions."
Opportunities to Build Teamwork Skills	Team forming, team storming, team norming, team performing	(P3) ". . .and what I also learned. . .that you can try to be Superman, be a jack-of-all-trades, be great at everything, but you're really going to be as strong as your team."
Opportunities to Build Presentation Skills	Using presentation software required collaboration and creativity, feedback	(P1) "For presentations, we would construct our PowerPoint presentation slide. Each person would be given a group of slides to work on, there would be an editor, and we would practice together. Teamwork was definitely necessary for that."

Generally, formal rules about how teams would communicate were not established by the teams. One team, however, established a written charter, the purpose of which was to foster communication. Team members recognized the need to hold each other accountable in order to make progress on their projects and ultimately complete them. Team members expected a high level of professionalism and integrity from one another. All teams had group roles; and in each case, team members chose their own roles. Roles were either defined based on the strengths and weaknesses of the team members, as defined by the team members themselves; or most often, roles were based on team members' work experiences.

The opportunity to build presentation skills was the third theme. Two categories emerged: (1) using presentation software required collaboration and creativity, and (2) feedback. Presentation software, usually PowerPoint, was used to make presentations to classmates and clients. In most teams everyone participated in working with the presentation software. One person sometimes emerged as someone who was good at using presentation software, and that person then became the team member who led the collaboration.

Many participants saw the presentation given to their classmates and professor as the practice for the *real* presentation to their client. They noted that the benefits of practicing in front of classmates and the professor were that practice made the presentations increasingly easier to do, feedback was provided, and it gave them opportunities to correct potential errors. The primary benefit of the practice presentations was the feedback given by class members and the professor. The feedback revealed three primary outcomes: it helped teams improve their presentation skills, it prepared them for the client presentation, and it enhanced further progress on their project. Larson and LaFasto (1989) found that the ability to give and receive constructive feedback from team members is a key reason why teams succeed or fail. They found that team members are often defensive, do not listen, and do not appreciate the “gift” (p. 45) of feedback. Team members in this research seemed to appreciate feedback.

Discussion

Results of the study yielded several key findings. First, there was alignment in the collaborative learning skills needed by employers and those enhanced through service-learning experiences in graduate business capstone courses. This alignment occurs in collaborative learning, which, according to the results of this study, includes: ability to work in teams, interpersonal skills, oral communication skills, persuasive ability, presentation skills, project management skills, and responsibility.

A second key finding was that the instructor’s role in structuring and facilitating service-learning experiences in a client-based business capstone course is fundamental to learning. Many factors should be considered when structuring the curriculum for a capstone course that is client based. Decisions include whether projects will be team- or individual-based, whether the instructor will choose the teams or the students will choose their own teams, whether the instructor or students will find the client and service-learning experience, and what the deliverables will be and how the deliverables will be presented and assessed. A lack of attention to any of these factors may lead to less successful outcomes for the students and/or the clients.

The third key finding was that decision-making skill is enhanced as a result of service-learning experiences. Employers value decision making. As evidence, Candy and Crebert (1991) found that employers criticize employees for lacking decision-making skills. The Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) found that decision making is one of the basic skills needed by students in the workplace (Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2014) recently issued their Job Outlook 2015. They surveyed employers from various industries such as manufacturing, finance, professional services, and retail trade concerning employment-related issues. Of the 250 employers surveyed and asked to rate the importance of certain job candidates’ skills/qualities, results showed

that employers rated teamwork, the ability to make decisions, the ability to solve problems, and the ability to communicate verbally as the most important skills.

Limitations of the Study

While this study revealed findings and implications for service learning's role in graduate business capstone courses, there are four main limitations. A limitation of non-experimental studies conducted for comparative purposes using non-randomly-selected participants is a lack of randomization and generalizability, and that was the case for this study. The ten qualitative participants came from only three MBA programs; and since there are hundreds of MBA programs in the U.S., results may not be generalizable. Further, two of the three MBA programs represented by the qualitative interviews are religious institutions, which may or may not mean those students have different views about service learning when compared to secular institutions. In addition, it was also possible that students who enrolled in an MBA program that included a service-learning experience may have had pre-conceived ideas that they would benefit from service learning; and this could limit generalizability to all capstone courses.

Another limitation is that various studies describe skills and attributes in different ways. A single way to identify and describe the desired skills and attributes does not exist. For example, one study may separate written skills and oral skills into two variables (Segon & Booth, 2012) while another study may combine them into one variable (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012). In addition, skills may not have the same definitions within organizational contexts. Smith (1995) showed, for example, that teamwork means something different to members of different levels of an organization. To management, teamwork means staff and line workers should engage in activities such as working overtime. To staff and line workers, teamwork means management should reduce their salaries to promote equity throughout the organization.

The employability skills list used in this study was based on a prior study and is not exhaustive. Other employability skills would be interesting to study. For example, *leadership* has been studied as an employability skill (Duke, 2002) and was mentioned by some of this study's interview participants as a skill needed when working with a team. Leadership is likewise important to employers. In a study where employers were asked what the most important attributes were for a job candidate's résumé, *leadership* (77.8%) and *ability to work in a team* (77.8%) tied for first place (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2014). Thus, leadership is an employability skill that may be important to business and to business educators, but it was not specifically measured in this study.

Finally, this study did not seek to distinguish between part-time and full-time MBA students, and the two groups' characteristics may differ. In general, part-time MBA students are employed during their graduate studies and balance both work and school (Rafferty, 2012). In this study, 92.3% of *survey respondents*

indicated they worked full time, and 90% of *interview participants* responded that they worked full time.

Recommendations

Findings of this study revealed that, for a capstone course that includes service learning, structure and the instructor's facilitation of the course are keys to student learning. Therefore, the first recommendation is that a course that includes service learning should be team-based, and instructors should provide students guidance for working in teams. Because teamwork is so important to successful outcomes and because employers value teamwork skills in the workplace, training on how to work in teams should be built into curriculum goals to maximize team productivity and minimize team conflict. This recommendation is supported by at least two other studies. French and Bell (1994) suggested that team-building activities could help teams learn how to make decisions, set goals, clarify roles, solve problems, and build relationships. Bacon, Stewart, and Silver (1999) found that the MBA program they studied did not have an emphasis on training teams to work together and recommended further team training be infused into the MBA program curriculum, not just in one or a few courses.

A second recommendation is to provide guidance to students on how to resolve conflicts within their teams. In the current study, the major source of conflict occurred during the storming stage and often because team members were added to the team after the team had gone through the forming stage and established group norms. Instructors should either avoid putting students on teams that have already formed or provide guidance to student teams about how to integrate a new member into the team. Faculty who teach courses where group work is required should recognize that conflict is likely to occur and prepare students to proactively manage the conflict so that group projects can move forward and finish well. Group cohesion could be encouraged through team-building activities woven into the curriculum. In addition, business faculty and others in charge of curriculum should consider incorporating specific instruction about how to manage team conflict early in the curriculum. Faculty must recognize that conflict resolution should be taught. Teaching conflict resolution skills would help teams be more successful with their projects as well as prepare them better to manage workplace conflicts.

Another recommendation is that MBA programs that include service-learning experiences should emphasize that these courses may enhance graduates' ability to engage in collaborative learning. The ability to work in teams, to manage projects, and to assume responsibility are a few of the skills resulting from collaborative learning that should be welcome news to employers hiring MBA graduates.

A final recommendation is that faculty teach/facilitate decision-making processes. In the same way that conflict was identified as a barrier to successful teamwork, decision making emerged as one of the top three skills enhanced by

service learning in business capstone courses (although statistical significance was not found); and decision making also emerged as a theme in the qualitative analysis. Faculty who design and/or teach courses where teamwork is involved should instruct students in how to make decisions that help their team complete their assigned tasks. Students learn various ways of making decisions, such as decision making by consensus, following Robert's Rules of Order, or other formal voting methods. In working with thousands of work teams in a variety of industries, LaFasto and Larson (2001) found that "the inability to solve process problems accounts for the failure of teams as often as does the inability to solve the substantive problems" (p. 92). Teaching business students to make decisions that help them solve process problems may help them make better decisions and solve problems in the workplace.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine the alignment between the employability skills employers need and the employability skills that graduate business students gain through service learning in business capstone courses. Graduate faculty, administrators, and those who employ business graduates can be encouraged by the findings of this study, which show there is alignment between the skills being taught in MBA programs and those most desired by employers. These same groups should also be encouraged that service learning enhances certain employability skills, especially presentation skills, decision-making skills, and teamwork. Graduate faculty should design well-thought-out service-learning experiences that consider how teams are structured, provide assistance with team conflicts, and help students learn to make decisions that propel their projects toward successful conclusions.

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