Beneficiaries’ Perspective on Service Learning: Case Study of Advertising and Public Relations Campaign Course

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Abstract
The literature on service learning is replete with the benefits of this pedagogical approach to students as well as the community. The literature is almost silent on the viewpoints of beneficiaries of service learning projects. The overarching aim of this study was to obtain the reaction of beneficiaries to campaign materials produced by students of an advertising and public relations campaigns course at the University of Botswana. Using in-depth interviews, officials of 13 organizations were asked to evaluate the campaign materials in the indices of how these are aligned to corporate outlook and the brief they gave the students as well as to find out their attitudes toward the concepts. Majority of respondents expressed favorable attitude toward the campaign materials and indicated a willingness to flight the campaigns to give greater mileage to their marketing efforts.

Keywords
beneficiaries, campaign, public relations, advertising

The Department of Media Studies, University of Botswana, is relatively new having been set up in 2003. The department has the following streams at the undergraduate level: broadcast journalism, print journalism, radio journalism, film, as well as public relations and advertising. The public relations and advertising stream offers foundation courses in public relations and advertising, introduction to public relations writing and advertising copywriting, advertising and public relations campaigns, as well as public communication campaigns. To assist students to function well in the stream and become well-rounded media studies’ graduates, they take a number of core courses such as origins and theories of mass communication, video and photo journalism, news reporting and editing, introduction to cinema, newsgathering for print journalists, radio for development, education and entertainment, media in Botswana, newsroom operations, press and broadcast law, computer animation, news and documentary video, features and magazine writing, desktop publishing (DTP) and digital media, media ethics, beat reporting, computer-assisted journalism, radio news and current affairs, and so on.

In the 2009-2010 session, the department started offering a new syllabus, which was designed to address the weaknesses in the old syllabus. Such weaknesses included wrong sequencing of courses, poorly developed complement of courses in each stream, and so on. The revisions also made the program more relevant to the needs of industry. As part of the approval process, structures within the University—Department and faculty boards, Library, and University Senate—as well as representatives from industries had to be consulted and their approvals obtained. Their suggestions and recommendations were factored into the final syllabus, which was approved by the University Council. At the moment, both syllabi are running pari passu as the old is being phased out gradually. As a consequence, the Level 1 students admitted in August 2009 are taking courses in the new syllabus while Levels 2 to 4 are still taking courses from the old.

The advertising and public relations campaigns course has as its objectives fostering in students the ability to design and produce marketing communication campaign materials. Using a mix of classroom teaching, eLearning, and PowerPoint presentations, students learn how to carry out situation analysis involving the company that owns the product or offers the service, product usage, company and market analysis, product and brand analysis, competitive analysis, setting objectives, strategy, positioning, funding of the campaign, targeting and delivering the message, media planning, related marketing communication, direct marketing, and public relations. They are shown campaigns that had been produced by students as well as others. They are expected to pick products that are presently not being advertised so as to

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avoid duplicating concepts and executions. They require approval of the course lecturer, if they intend to do campaigns on products that are presently being advertised. They are expected to use the skills taught in class to understand these products/services and produce campaigns that would be presented in class. During class presentation, the course lecturer and his colleagues as well as fellow students critique their work and offer suggestions for improvement.

The approach adopted for delivering the course is in line with the University’s Learning and Teaching Policy, which is based on the principle of “intentional learning” (University of Botswana, 2008, p. 3). Intentional learning translates to pedagogical approaches that “encourage active learning, the achievement of learning outcomes and the development of self-directed, independent learners who have learned how to learn” (University of Botswana, 2008, p. 3). Students offering the course are told to study the company offering the product/service, the industry sector, and product usage; do a market analysis; come up with campaign objectives, strategy, factor in competition; determine media and vehicles for delivering the message to avoid waste exposure; and use direct marketing and public relations techniques all aimed at giving mileage to the campaign. They are told to have good justifications for decisions taken as they have to respond to critiques of their campaign during class presentation.

The various campaigns that have been produced by students over the years take different formats, with variations in tone, styles, and appeals all geared toward resonating with the target audience and influencing them positively about the products and services. Most of the campaigns had TV and radio spots, and newspaper and billboards ads. To a lesser extent, street pole advertising, mobile (minibus), posters, handbills and brochures, T-shirts, mascot, inserts, and blogs were used.

In specific terms, campaigns produced by the students had the following slants: Eluve shoe polish portrayed the use of the product as guaranteeing success, Taku shoes emphasized athleticism, Oh Gabz and O’Genes clothing labels placed a premium on great razzmatazz, Gemere emphasized a healthy lifestyle, Glass Craft Botswana showcased various glass products that could be given out as gifts as well as inscriptions that the company could make on glass surfaces, Ecco Beef touted the goodness of the product with explicit sex appeal, Screen Magazine used Hollywood stars to promote the magazine as a TV viewing guide, Botswana Stock Exchange attempted to sensitize the target market to investing in stocks, Itekanele medical aid provider emphasized the low monthly installments and clearly targeted tertiary education students through models and students’ rate as well as the production of Itekanele lecture time table, the responsible drinking campaign placed emphasis on how too much indulgence in alcoholic beverage would impact negatively on students’ academic performance, the University of Botswana corporate ad campaign tried to make the University attractive to school leavers by showcasing media personalities and celebrities attending the institution as well as placing emphasis on academic excellence. The campaign for the Department of Road Transport and Safety involved the creation of a mascot—Whewly—as well as emphasizing the love affair between a driver and his car hence resulting in safer driving habits.

The overarching aim of this study was to find out the attitude and views of officers of corporate bodies who were beneficiaries of these service learning projects.

**Service Learning**

From a historical perspective, service learning developed in the 1960s as a way by which universities would transform society by solving “real” life problems, but it is now framed as a means of improving students’ learning (Lounsbury & Pollack, 2001). This, perhaps, explains the ways in which service learning is conceived. Goldberg, Richburg, and Wood (2006) define service learning as experiential or real-life learning involving a reflective problem-solving approach that enables students to provide service to a community. Madsen and Turnbull (2006) add another dimension to the experiential component identified by Goldberg et al., in that it involves an organized, thoughtful, and meaningful project that addresses a community’s felt needs while resulting in enhanced learning. Hinck and Brandell (1999) define it as methods that help students to learn and develop through participation in service that meets community needs. To Klink and Athaide (2004), the concept refers to experiential education by which students’ activities address human and community needs while affording the students structured opportunities for learning and development. The Corporation for National Community Service sees it as “a method of teaching and learning that connects classroom lessons with meaningful service to the community” (Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2008, p. 37) while to the American Association of Higher Education, it is intellectual and civic activities within the framework of the classroom that work to address real-world problems and needs (Madsen & Turnbull, 2006).

However, although service learning and community service as well as volunteerism can be used interchangeably (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006; Dymond et al., 2008; Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000), differences do exist. Dymond et al. (2008) note that while service learning involves application of concepts taught in class to service projects that assist in deepening students’ understanding, community service and volunteerism relate to work done in the community that is not linked directly to the school curriculum. Those that do not delink the concepts argue that it instills in the students a personal responsibility for improving their communities (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006) as well as fosters community activism (Roschelle et al., 2000). In this same vein, some programs are able to integrate community service and volunteerism into the curriculum, for example, the Justice and Peace program at the University of San Francisco where
students do “intensive scholarly reading and writing related to their community activism” (Roschelle et al., 2000, p. 840). A common definition of service learning involves joining the concepts of community service and academic learning. Where there seems to be common ground among scholars, however, is the tremendous advantages conferred by service learning. It increases opportunities for students in the community as well as fosters integrative learning experiences while strengthening community relationships (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006); it is intellectually demanding, connects theory with practice, and promotes students’ moral development (Roschelle et al., 2000); it enhances students’ skill levels—leadership, relationship building, social problem solving, occupational and life skills while fostering social responsibility, concern for social problems, civic responsibilities and commitment to public service (McCarty & Tucker, 1999; Smith-Pariola & Goke-Pariola, 2006); it benefits students by enhancing their performance in traditional measures of learning; it is advantageous to organizations, through students’ application of problem-solving skills, and to faculty by bringing new life into the classroom and making teaching a more enjoyable experience (Hagenbuch, 2006; Silverman, 2007); and it answers the various dysfunctions in contemporary academia as well as organizes and coordinates exciting development in pedagogical practice (Smith-Pariola & Goke-Pariola, 2006).

Service learning is also credited with deepening students’ understanding of taught concepts through application of these concepts to service projects (Dymond et al., 2008; Smith-Pariola & Goke-Pariola, 2006), and addresses human and community needs while providing structured avenues that promote learning and development (Klink & Athaide, 2004).

Scholars have also reported positive results in delivery of lessons in various disciplines using service learning. Hale (2008) notes that among student teachers, service learning fosters self-esteem, self-efficacy, positive views of diverse cultures, and other important educational competencies. Teacher candidates also learnt about diversity, social justice, and themselves from exposure to service learning (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007). In a business communication course, Littlefield (2006) reports that service learning made students more hardworking while paying attention to details so much so that beneficiaries were impressed by their hard work, creativity, professionalism, and enthusiasm. The college and University also benefited from the favorable publicity.

In a personal selling course, Hagenbuch’s (2006) study threw up a positive relationship between service learning sales project and improvement in overall students’ attitude toward personal selling. The use of this pedagogical method also resulted in increased understanding of personal selling theory, fostered valuable work experience, more confidence about actual selling, and satisfaction in helping others. In a technical writing course, service learning aided development of students’ sense of civic responsibility, improvement in professional writing skills, and professionalism as student writers (Barton & Evans, 2003). Silverman (2007) reports that in a public relations campaign course, students had more awareness of a community problem, were introduced into the real world, and learnt important public relations campaign skills.

**Scope of the Study**

While there is a preponderance of advantages students stand to gain from service learning, what seems to be lacking in the literature on service learning is the perspective of organizations and institutions who are beneficiaries of service learning projects. This study therefore sought to obtain the views of officers of the various establishment that had been contacted by the students of BMS 314—advertising and public relations campaigns—and for which they had designed campaigns to find out if the campaigns adequately reflected the brief they gave to the students and if the concepts and messages the students had developed would, in their estimation, aid their marketing efforts. The study also sought to find out if they would be willing to flight the campaigns as well as sought their views on areas requiring improvements. The campaigns under study cover a 6-year period (2006-2011).

**Research Questions**

The study therefore sought answers to the following research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** What constitutes the predominant evaluation of beneficiaries of the advertising and public relations campaign course to the campaign materials in the context of their brief as well as corporate outlook?
- **Research Question 2:** Are beneficiaries’ attitude toward the concepts and executions positive enough for them to be willing to flight the campaigns?
- **Research Question 3:** Do the campaign materials produced by the students compare favorably with those of beneficiaries?

**Method**

In-depth interviews conducted from October 2010 to February 2011 were used to obtain beneficiaries’ response to the campaign materials. Those interviewed ranged from officers, sales managers, public relations managers, marketing managers, general managers, or CEOs of the following products/companies: Eluve Shoe Polish, Taku Shoes, Mado Shoes, Oh Gabz and O’Genes (clothing labels), Ecco Beef (corned beef made by Botswana Meat Commission [BMC]), Gemere (local ginger drink), Glass Craft Botswana (specialty/gifts),
Screen Magazine (Lifestyle publication), Itekanele (medical aid provider), Department of Road Transport and Safety, Botswana Stock Exchange, University of Botswana’s Department of Sports and Recreation for a campaign on responsible drinking used during the intervarsity games and the Department of Public Affairs for Corporate advertising campaign for the University of Botswana. One officer was interviewed per organization/department thus making up a total of 14 respondents. In-depth interviews were favored because of the small sample involved as well as its ability to provide detailed background information as regards respondents’ opinions, evaluations, and experiences (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Two research assistants were contracted to carry out the interviews with the identified beneficiaries. The research assistants called up each beneficiary and booked an appointment. They then used the interview questions (see appendix) as a guide, but the interview climate determined the questions that were actually asked (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Beneficiaries’ responses were tape recorded and transcribed by the research assistants.

Findings

Evaluation of Advertising Campaign Copies by Beneficiaries

A clear majority of organizational officials/representatives liked the campaign copies. While some were very effusive in their praise, others felt the materials were just ok. The representative of the Botswana Stock Exchange said in response to the slogan the students came up with, YOUR MONEY, OUR BUSINESS, YOUR PROFIT: “That was smart and I commend them for that.” The public relations officer of the Department of Road Transport and Safety also gave kudos to the efforts of the students “Generally, I will applaud all these campaigns; I am really impressed with the LOVE RITE, DRIVE TO LIVE theme which was used. Its unique, it came from nowhere to somewhere, so I really appreciate it.” The representative of Glass Craft Botswana noted that “the graphic advertising material is well laid out and is very descriptive.” From Mado Shoes comes this commendation, “I was impressed with the work . . . [and] the creativity [in] the . . . campaign material.” The Botswana Stock Exchange officer felt that the choice of theme music was “funky and fine.” There were a few dissenting voices though. The managing director of Eluve Shoe Polish complained about poor lighting in the TV commercial and unconvincing print advert that simply focused on the product with “nothing special to attract buyers.” From BMC came criticism about the sex appeal in the Ecco Beef TV commercial. In the opinion of the marketing manager, the students got the target demographic wrong based on the concept that they had developed. He also complained about the radio ad being too event focused as opposed to advertising the product. The radio ad in question invited listeners to an event in an upscale venue where an award-winning chef would demonstrate various recipes for Ecco Beef. Even among interviewees who liked the copies, they still felt that there was room for improvement. The officer from Glass Craft Botswana was of the view that

the motto of the company is “we blast glass” and it was never mentioned in any of the adverts. Our company makes wedding, corporate, and individual designs for clients and this was never mentioned in the adverts. With those added, the adverts will be perfect.

The representative of the Botswana Stock Exchange took issue with the aping of the NASDAQ brand as well as emphasis on the U.S. dollar in the materials, which goes against their attempts at making the exchange locally relevant.

Alignment of Campaign Materials With Organizational Outlook

A majority of the interviewees were of the view that the campaign materials adequately reflect their corporate vision and mission and that the campaigns were an excellent interpretation of their corporate outlook. The respondent from the Department of Public Affairs at the University of Botswana noted that “I think the vision comes out very well, they keep repeating [that] this university [is] . . . an academic institution of excellence.” The same sentiments were expressed by the respondent from Department of Road Transport and Safety: “Yes, [it is line with] . . . our vision and mission, our vision—’safe roads to 2016’—comes out right in the adverts. I think here and there it has some aspects which add to the vision.” Those who felt that the campaign materials did not reflect their corporate outlook were unhappy that the students did not adequately address themselves to their core business. For example, the official from the Department of Sports and Recreation at the University of Botswana felt that sports and recreation were conspicuously absent from the copies that overemphasized academic performance. The official at O’Genes felt that the campaign concept was out of alignment with their product attributes. The official interviewed at Taku Shoes took issue with the model in the TV commercial who was smoking because “it seems as if the product is promoting smoking.”

Beneficiaries’ Willingness to Flight Students’ Campaign

A slight majority of respondents said they would be willing to use the campaign materials in their marketing efforts. But even among the respondents with this viewpoint, about half still felt that improvements were required before they would give their final go ahead for the materials to be flighted. Those who gave an unqualified positive response to the use
of the campaign materials praised the students’ creativity and exhibition of professionalism. From the Botswana Stock Exchange comes this commendation that is representative of beneficiaries with favorable views about the campaign materials:

It is something that is not new to our department but there are improvements here and there; themes and the mascot—Wheely—is a good concept which added more value to the campaign and yes we can adopt the concept as the department and use it. The T-shirts are also uniquely designed and fashionable so it is a concept that we can use. And it also brings people of different kinds, age into the campaign as you have ones for the young and old, long sleeved and even on both men and women’s trousers. The mobile adverts are also advantage to applaud [sic].

Those who gave qualified support wanted improvements in voice over, tighter and punchier copy, more information about the products such as where to get it, incentives, cost, and so on; use of local models and settings; better audio and picture quality; celebrity endorsement; better choice of fonts; adoption of beneficiaries’ ad styles; removal of brand names of items that do not have a direct bearing to the product/service been advertised; and avoidance of dull colors.

Beneficiaries who did not indicate interest in flighting the product cited poor execution and similarity between the students’ concept and their campaigns; hence adoption would amount to duplication of efforts. The official from Eluve shoe polish was dissatisfied with the poor picture quality, low audio, and inappropriate setting for the product in the TV commercial. The representative of O’Genes was unhappy with the dull colors used in the product posters, which she felt was a disservice to the brand. The respondent from the Botswana Stock Exchange fingered similarities between the students’ work and their own corporate campaign: “I didn’t see anything that we can take from it and use because looking at the material there is a lot that we are doing and have already done maybe not in exactly the same light but similar.”

Comparison of Students and Beneficiaries’ Campaigns

When asked to compare the students’ campaign with theirs, reactions were largely in favor of the materials produced by the students. The Gemere ginger drink representative said that their present campaign would use concepts developed by the students. The interviewee from Glass Craft Botswana admitted that the students’ campaign was more “creative, informative, and catchy” than anything they have done. Itakenele medical aid official said that the campaign compares favorably and that they would adopt some of the students’ ideas. The officer from the Public Affairs Department of the University of Botswana got inspired by the students’ work:

“I’m impressed, it’s actually relives me because I’ve been pounding my head thinking can I use media studies students. I think this one is saying yes you can use media students they represent the youth out there so it is a good effort. They have really given me ideas because I was in a dead end wanting to create messages. I really like the TV advert, the one with the personalities, it is very, very basic and real and it is the best so far for me. I like adverts that you can identify with so I think they are a good attempt.

She was unhappy about one of the TV commercials that showed an operating table in that it was too graphic and the spot jumped the gun by showing medical graduates from the institution when the medical school has just commenced operations and the first cohort has not yet graduated. The officer from the Department of Road Transport and Safety commended the efforts the student put into the campaign: “They do compare with ours; it shows more research was done. The concept of using T-shirts is the one that we have been using before even though yours are unique. We are also using brochure and pamphlets.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is a preponderance of studies about the advantages that service learning has on students from making them more civic-oriented and responsible, results in better grasp of concepts, deepens students’ understanding, and better prepares them for the world of work. The literature is also replete with the benefits to the community from this pedagogical approach that also gives more mileage to the town and gown concept. But there seems to be little in the literature about the viewpoints of beneficiaries—that is, those persons or institutions who gain from service learning projects. This study therefore makes an important contribution to the literature by showcasing their views.

The study uses an advertising and public relations campaign course offered in the Department of Media Studies, University of Botswana, as the focal point of this investigation. Over the years, students had been told to contact companies and institutions that were not being advertised and offer to design a campaign for their products and services. This study sought the views of company/organizational officials. The products/services that constituted the study sample were products that were locally available. Even though students over the years had done campaigns on a variety of brands, some of these companies had no local representative whose views could be obtained. An example that best represents this category is Frutina soft drinks, which is sold in shops but does not have a parent company available locally. Some brands could not fit in the study because company officials were not
available to be interviewed. An example in this category is Capital Bank as it was difficult getting the views of company officials. All in all, 13 companies agreed to participate in the study. The two research assistants—one male and one female—proceeded by showing the officials the campaign materials, asked them questions based on the interview guide, and recorded their comments.

The study’s findings were revealing. Doing campaigns for these mostly local and small and medium enterprises was deeply appreciated by beneficiaries. There were a few negative reactions based on some of the concepts but, by and large, organizational officials felt students had demonstrated a proper grasp of the brief they were given and aligned the message to their corporate outlook and target audience. They felt that the concepts the students had developed showed good judgment and creativity, and they were largely willing to use the campaign materials for their marketing efforts. Even those who were not completely satisfied felt that some of the students’ ideas could be adapted to give added mileage to the marketing of their products and services.

Due to the fact that there was considerable time lag between the time the campaigns were produced and the study period, this researcher noticed some element of experimental mortality. For instance, in the O’Genes campaign, the proprieter was featured in the TV commercial thus creating the impression that she was aware of what was going on and, according to the students who produced the campaign materials, she had shown an interest in flying the materials locally. However, when an officer in the fashion house was interviewed, she complained that the company was not consulted, thus giving the impression that she was not present at the time the campaign was produced. Other studies may wish to shorten the time lag to help better recollections of activities preceding the campaign.

Another area that is worthy of further investigation is to obtain beneficiaries’ views as regards the media plan that is an integral part of any campaign. Even though students had produced such plans, it was felt that it might have become irrelevant with time as some of the vehicles may no longer be available with the passage of time. Asking for such evaluation will assist in finding out if the plan to reach the target audience has the blessings of the beneficiaries. Further studies may also wish to measure the effect of the campaign on a sample of the target audience.

Many service learning studies in various disciplines are present in the literature, but there are very few in the area of public relations, advertising, and communication. And as Silverman (2007) notes about public relation courses, which also applies to advertising and communication programs, “these present an excellent opportunity for incorporating many service learning techniques since they frequently engage students in class discussion, class presentation and other active learning techniques” (p. 412). Communication, public relations, and advertising scholars also need to conduct studies on their use of this natural pedagogical method so that best practice can become available to guide learning and teaching in the discipline for the benefits of learners, the community, and beneficiaries. Another research angle could be level of professional satisfaction enjoyed by communication, public relations and advertising academics who use service learning in their teaching.

On the managerial implications of the study, it is clear that students who are exposed to practical work from both the literature and the result of this study are better prepared for the world of work and would contribute more meaningfully to the achievement of corporate objectives as opposed to students who are given lectures on campaign management and do not get into the nitty-gritty of campaign work. Students, who are exposed to the former, pick up active learning skills and become self-directed intentional learners, which is good for business and the bottom line.

Appendix

Interview Question

1. Give a general evaluation of the advertising copies and campaign materials.
2. Are the campaign/advertising copies a good interpretation of your vision and mission statements?
3. Are you comfortable running the campaign or flighting the advertising copies?
4. Are there areas needing improvement in the copies?
5. Are the campaign/advertising copies a good reflection of the brief (or the discussion you had with the students)?
6. Do the campaign copies compare favorably with your adverts/campaigns either in the present or the past?

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