Design of Project-Based Blended Learning Activities in International Marketing

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Abstract—This paper starts with the necessity and feasibility analysis of project-based blended learning in international marketing, and elaborates the content and the methods of the course project, which integrate online and offline learning process to encourage the students' initiative on learning, so as to achieve a desirable learning outcome.

Keywords—project-based, blended learning, international marketing

I. DEFINITIONS

A. Project-based Learning

According to the professors of Buck Institute for Education (2016), project-based learning (PBL) is a student-centered pedagogy that involves a dynamic classroom approach in which it is believed that students acquire a deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems. Students learn about a subject by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to a complex question, challenge, or problem. It is a style of active learning and inquiry-based learning.

Project-based learning emphasizes long-term, interdisciplinary and student-centered learning activities. Unlike traditional, instructor-led classroom activities, students often must organize their own work and manage their own time in a project-based class. Project-based instruction always emphasizes students’ collaborative or individual effort to present what is being learned (Yayin Guo 2017).

B. Blended Learning

Blended learning in this study refers to the learning mode that integrates information technology and education. It requires the use of the Internet and intelligent cloud platforms to combine face-to-face learning and online learning. It requires the physical presence of both instructor and student, with some elements of student control over time, place, path, or pace. (N Friesen 2012)

II. THE PROBLEMS IN THE LEARNING OF INTERNATIONAL MARKETING

International Marketing is a specialized course for Business English juniors. It aims to foster students’ comprehensive capability in both knowledge and practical skills in international marketing. After studying the course, students are expected to have grasped fundamental marketing knowledge, understood the systematic operating process, gained certain amount of first-hand experience and developed cross-cultural awareness and necessary skills for cross-cultural communication.

However, in the traditional marketing teaching process, teachers are more focused on the theoretical knowledge, and it is hard for students to obtain satisfying learning outcome due to the lack of practical experience. Students tend to memorize theories and terminology to pass the exam while they are unable to put what they have learned into practice or solve problems in marketing.

Students would encounter two major problems in their learning process:

A. Students Generally Lack Initiative to Learn

The goal of the traditional classroom teaching method is to impart theoretical knowledge to students, relying on the “knowledge-focused”, “teacher-centered” mode of learning. Students can only learn what the teacher presents in class, and final exam scores is the only criterion to evaluate students (Guixiang Wang 2019).

The traditional teaching method is harmful to both teachers and students, and it restricts their development. Quite a few students are tired of memorizing terminology or abstract theories, while teachers mechanically repeat the content of the textbook without thinking about its application. In the end the students lose their enthusiasm for learning. They are not willing to make effort for solving problems, but wait for the teacher to give a “standard” or “correct” answer.

B. The Learning Resources Need to be Updated and Enriched.

Although various new media nowadays provide students with enormous learning resources, the fact is that many of them contain wrong information or misleading opinions. Since most students have limited ability to tell good resources from bad, they tend to absorb whatever they can find online, which greatly affects their learning efficiency. Against that background, the exploit of appropriate learning resources is particularly important.

The two issues of learning initiative and resource quality are actually interrelated. If students are provided with appropriate learning instruction and supporting materials to their needs, they can be more self-directed and independent.
They can be more confident and active in using their ability, their knowledge and suitable tools to complete their learning tasks.

As a matter of fact, students today have great potential for independent learning. They have grown up in an information era and have developed relatively high information literacy and strong computer skills. Most of them have smart phones and computers, and have the habit of using mobile terminals to process information anytime and anywhere, and are more adaptive to information and intelligent learning modes. In that context, it is quite feasible to conduct blended learning. The multimedia of the new era can stimulate their interest in learning, facilitate the utility of knowledge, and make it possible to study the latest commercial events or marketing cases, so that students can understand the current marketing environment and learn the responding marketing principles and skills.

III. THE PRINCIPLES BEHIND THE ACTIVITY DESIGN

A. Immersing Students in an Engaging and Meaningful Question, Problem or Challenge

John Dewey believed that “learning by doing” enabled students to develop their problem-solving skills. They could then clarify the learning and apply it in their future lives.(Mike Pegg 2017) Erich Stiefvater and Jennie Fennelle proposed in Using Project-Based Blended Learning to Engage Career and Technical Education Students that project-based learning is “a hands-on approach that can build skills, mindsets and behaviors needed for success in the modern workplace. In addition, by challenging students to work on meaningful tasks and produce tangible results they can relate or apply to their lives and work, project-based learning can increase engagement.” (Emma Juaneda-Ayensa 2018)

B. Focusing on the “Student-centered” Mode of Learning and Encouraging Active Learning

An important issue that should be taken into consideration is how to mobilize students’ enthusiasm about learning, inspiring and helping them to learn independently. The key is to provide adequate learning materials and support, which could arouse students’ initiative to learn. Carefully designed questions and tasks, rich materials, effective studying method and timely support from the instructor are surely conducive to the acquisition and use of learning resources, creating favorable learning environment for students.

IV. THE CONTENT OF INTERNATIONAL MARKETING PROJECT

Following the real service marketing procedure, the project requires students to design a marketing plan for a real service targeting foreign customers, such as Chinese language training, local tour guiding, flavor restaurants, housekeeping services, etc. The project is completed through teamwork and includes four major units as shown in the table I.

| Project unit            | Specific task                                                                 | Deliverable          |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Service research        | Study of a service                                                           | Service analysis report |
| Market demand research  | Survey of target customers; Analysis of the market demand                   | Survey questionnaire  |
| 4Cs marketing           | Analysis of cost to customers, service procedure and communication with customers | Market research report |
| Marketing plan presentation | Presentation of the marketing plan                                         | An oral report       |

Generally, students should conduct customer survey with domestic and foreign customers, analyze the marketing environment and make an innovative, feasible and effective marketing plan for the service.

Throughout the implementation of the project, students need to fully utilize their professional knowledge, so that they can deepen their understanding of the relevant knowledge. They may encounter various problems in the process, and the instructor can refer students to relevant cases and supporting materials, which can help them in solving the problem independently.

The project-based learning method enables students to verify their theoretical knowledge and develop their ability to solve problems independently in practice, which is an important method to cultivate their ability to work.

V. THE DESIGN OF BLENDED LEARNING PROCESS

Compared with a monotonous lecture or repeated exercises in class, independent inquiry and practice can arouse...
enthusiasm and creativity of students in a more effective way. In the context of blended learning, the main process for the course project is shown below Table II.

| Pre-class (online learning) | In-class (face-to-face) | After-class | Assessment and feedback (online and off-line) |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Students read the guide to clarify learning objectives, learning content, specific tasks and resources | Instructor answers and explains | Students conceive the task plan | Online communication |
| Students watch micro-lectures (knowledge review or expansion) | Students put forward questions, have discussions, make judgment, explanation, justification; Instructor provides enlightenment and strategic guidance | Students formulate the plan | Face-to-face communication, Online communication |
| Students explore the solution to the problems | Students present and evaluate the report; Instructor organizes the presentation, discussion and evaluation. Instructor provides enlightenment and guidance | Students explore substitute solution, revise the report and submit it to the platform | Face-to-face communication, Online communication, Instructor’s assessment, Peer evaluation |
| Instructor provides supporting material: references, resources, examples, cases, templates and F&Q; Students search the information, make analysis and complete the report independently or in group | | | |

Each of the project unit is divided into two stages:

A. Task Planning

Reasonable task planning is a crucial factor to the success of the project, which is realized through careful analysis and preparation. The instructor should prepare some guidelines and basic knowledge involved in the completion of the project. Students should be ready to collect and summarize what is needed for the completion of the project.

To be specific, students should first read the unit guide before class to clarify the learning objectives, learning content, specific tasks to be completed and supporting resources. Should they have any questions, they could leave message on the platform or communicate with the instructor and other students through QQ, Wechat or other IM applications.

Next, the students should study the video lectures online, reviewing the fundamental knowledge related to the unit tasks. At the beginning of the video lectures, there are usually a number of questions. Students have to find answers to questions and combine them using critically thinking skills to come up with answers. Video lectures usually help students to solidify their basic knowledge by summarizing concepts and reviewing case analysis.

In class, the instructor tests students’ understanding and mastery of the knowledge through a series of questions and discussions. In addition to the questions raised in the video lecture, the instructor also enumerates some cases that require students to use the knowledge learned in the video lecture to make judgments and justify their answers.

The assignment after class is to develop a plan for the task. Students establish project teams, select team leaders, and allocate the tasks to each team member. A task plan usually includes three parts. Firstly, the plan includes a specification for the working steps. Students analyze the task and decide the sequence of work to be done under the guidance of the instructor. For example, the market research mainly includes designing survey questionnaire, reaching target market, analyzing data, and writing a survey reports. Students should figure out every step to be taken.

Next, the team should decide the allocation of the job. Each team member plays a different role and undertakes his assigned task. Each student completes his or her own work independently, and cooperates with other members to achieve the common goal. For problems in the planning process, students usually rely on their own experience and knowledge to figure them out. But for some difficult problems, the instructor should provide timely guidance.

Thirdly, the plan should clarify the schedule of the project. The time needed for completing the project is equal to the sum of the time spent on each individual task. The team should plan the schedule based on the complexity of the tasks, so as to ensure that the unit project can be completed as scheduled.

B. Task Performing

At this stage, students should implement the task and complete the corresponding task report, i.e. obtaining and processing information, and drawing a conclusion.

Students can draw on a wide range of supporting materials on the teaching platform, including case studies of various
levels of complexity, report templates, and frequently asked questions. Students can choose the learning resources suitable for their actual interest and needs, and with the help of those “scaffolding” they can get better prepared for the specific tasks. In the course of selecting the supporting material, the students can share their idea or get help from the instructor and their classmates through online communication. After the report is completed, it will be submitted to the teaching platform.

The instructor’s role as a motivator is very important in this course. He not only encourages students’ initiative to acquire knowledge, but also stimulates a lasting enthusiasm of learning. He should also think about how to support students through effective instructing and scaffolding.

The in-class activities include report presentation and peer evaluation.

Each team gives a presentation of its research result to the class. Other teams can ask questions, make comment or propose suggestions for improvement. The instructor, on the other hand, is responsible for summarizing what has been learned, organizing the discussions and collaborative inquiry of students, providing timely and appropriate enlightenment or instructions based on the particular need of each student. He also helps students to form a reasonable and objective understanding of the implementation process and outcome of their work. The presentation and peer evaluation actually allow instructors and students to review and evaluate the entire project activities together, so that each student can find his strength and weaknesses.

When every report has been reviewed and assessed, the students will revise their report and submit it to the platform for open discussion and comment.

When the whole project is completed, the instructor and the students should review the process of the project together, summarizing lessons, identifying deficiencies, and then improve the project design.

VI. ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOME

During the blended-learning process, a dual evaluation model is conducted, i.e. formative evaluation and final evaluation. Formative evaluation accounts for 60% of the total score, including pre-class online learning assessment and task performance assessment. The assessment of online learning is based on the monitoring data of students’ learning process from the teaching platform, including the timespan of study, feedback on the video lectures, participation in the interactive discussions and quality of assignments. Peer evaluation plays an important role in the formative evaluation, since most of the tasks are conducted in groups and students are much involved in evaluating the performance of their group members. The final evaluation is made based on the presentation of the final marketing plan, accounting for 40% of the total.

VII. SUMMARY

International marketing is a course emphasizing practical skills and experience. By completing the course project, students can gain hands-on experience, enhancing their ability to solve practical problems and collaborate with others. Meanwhile, blended learning featuring flexible learning pace, rich learning materials and interactive peer evaluation can stimulate students’ initiative and strengthen their confidence in completing the tasks, thus achieving the desired result of learning.

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