

# What's in it for me? – Re-discovering the 'client' in client-centered learning

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Whilst the use of real life clients is becoming increasingly popular, particularly within the business school context, the focus has traditionally been on how industry representatives can enrich students' learning experiences. However, by doing so we have essentially ignored one of the key stakeholders in the education process: Industry collaboration. In the course design, this is a promise frequently made to attract students, demonstrating the real world validity of the program and thereby essentially gaining a marketing advantage for the course itself (Rundle-Thiele, Bennett, & Dann, 2005); however, the benefits and shortfalls for industry partners involved in these types of arrangements have been largely ignored.

This paper argues that it is time to pay more attention to the 'client' perspective in industry-integrated learning opportunities. By applying the *WIIFM* (What's in it for me?) *Effect* to 12 client-centered learning experiences, gained over a period of three and a half years, the author has identified six distinctive client types, which characterize different approaches to, and perceptions of, client-centered learning. Further analysis has resulted in the emergence of a hybrid type, which characterizes what the author refers to as the ideal industry partner. The paper concludes that client-centered learning is not a safe alternative to teacher-centered activities. However, it can be very rewarding, as long as the client's motivation is thoroughly considered and understood at the outset of the project. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2010, 11(3), 125-135)

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the focus in higher education has shifted from teacher- to student-centered education (Kennedy, Lawton, & Walker, 2001), with an increased emphasis on learners being actively engaged and valued as participants in the education process (Burns, 2002). Within the public relations and wider marketing education context there has been a move towards the inclusion of real life clients and case studies in the curriculum, aiming to provide students with an opportunity to gain meaningful real life experience whilst studying. However, despite a growing body of knowledge and continuous interest in client-centered learning, much of the attention given to the university-client relationship has been on the benefits for students, and increased workload for academic staff, whilst the client perspective has been largely ignored.

## CLIENT-CENTERED LEARNING

In today's fast changing business landscape, employers are seeking graduates who can demonstrate creativity, critical thinking, technical expertise and an ability to adapt to change (Ackerman, Gross, & Perner, 2003; Kerr & Proud, 2005). As a result, educators are under pressure to prepare undergraduate students to become "productive employees who can communicate effectively, work well in teams and solve problems, as well as demonstrate

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competent knowledge" (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009, p. 154). Group projects are particularly recognized as a tool that can be used to develop these key skills, in particular, client-based projects. Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2009) emphasize that the level of involvement may vary, depending on the individual client and the project set up. However, essentially client-based learning enables students to gain real life experience by working with clients on existing problems, which they then present with potential business solutions (Goodell & Kraft, 1991). These clients might be large or small, for-profit, or not-for-profit organizations, or government departments.

## BENEFITS

Within a marketing and communications context, live cases have been relatively well researched. Scholars agree that students tend to find them rewarding (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009) and are motivated to work hard (Goodell & Kraft, 1991). Despite recognizing that it can be very time-consuming (Bove & Davies, 2009), client-centered learning is known for helping in the development of communication, critical thinking and problem solving skills (Wojahn, Dyke, Riley, Hensel, & Brown, 2001), that is, those skills students will need in order to succeed in their post university career (Barr & McNeilly, 2002; Bove & Davies, 2009; Cooke & Williams, 2004; Kennedy et al., 2001). The frequently associated ambiguity of real life cases helps to develop students as self directed learners and problem solvers as well as adding a level of realism (Razzouk, Seitz, & Rizkallah, 2003). In the words of Razzouk et al. (2003), "Real life projects bring realism to marketing education" (p. 40). Additionally, client-based learning enables higher education institutions to demonstrate their commitment to give back to – or engage with – the community (Cooke & Williams, 2004; Goodell & Kraft, 1991; Razzouk et al., 2003). In the case of Curtin University, this close community relationship is part of the institution's overall corporate positioning<sup>2</sup>. Real life cases provide educators with an opportunity to remain in contact with industry leaders and up to date with business trends and practices (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009). Furthermore, the project-based working arrangement in itself provides an opportunity to create long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationships (Cooke & Williams, 2004).

However, despite the extensive documentation of the benefits to student learning, scholarly references to client benefits are characterized by a lack of first hand empirical insight. Documented benefits, such as cost savings and the recruitment of potential employees (Cooke & Williams, 2004), are based predominantly on assumptions.

## DISADVANTAGES

Despite the strong endorsement by scholars, client-centered learning does not come without its disadvantages. The arrangement and coordination of the real life project can become very time-consuming (Lopez & Lee, 2005; Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009), requiring extensive preparation, as well as screening for appropriateness and reliability. They essentially demand a high level of energy by the educator (Bowen, 2003). Students frequently assume a client-centered project may take the pressure off academic staff in terms of unit design and assignment content; however, scholars have highlighted that these kinds of arrangements

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<sup>2</sup> "Curtin University of Technology aspires to be a leading university in education and research serving the wider region. Therefore, community engagement is a primary focus for us." ([www.curtin.edu.au/community](http://www.curtin.edu.au/community))

require more effort and instructor involvement than other forms of classroom assignments (Kennedy et al., 2001; Razzouk et al., 2003). The identification of an appropriate project can be a challenge in itself (Goodell & Kraft, 1991; Razzouk et al., 2003). Clients should be selected carefully (Lopez & Lee, 2005; Orrell, 2004), as the success of the project is highly dependent on the client's ongoing commitment (Bowen, 2003). Students may also become frustrated when the client is perceived to be unresponsive or fails to provide sufficient insight into the challenge at hand (Kennedy et al., 2001). Parson and Lepkowska-White (2009) conclude that despite recognizing its benefits, students essentially consider the client-based project experience as more time-consuming and frustrating than theoretical projects.

#### GAP IN THE CURRENT LITERATURE: FORGETTING THE CLIENT IN CLIENT-CENTERED LEARNING?

As illustrated, scholarly research into client-centered learning has primarily focused on the promotion of benefits, rather than a critical analysis of challenges. Furthermore, literature to date has largely failed to include different stakeholder perspectives. The student experience has been the centre of attention (e.g. Goodell & Kraft, 1991; Wojahn et al., 2001), with some consideration of academic workload (e.g. Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009).

However, potential employers are crucial stakeholders in the educational process. Their collaboration in the course design is a promise frequently made to attract students, demonstrating the real-world validity of the program. In addition, this collaboration is often essential to meet accreditation requirements, such as the one set by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), which strongly emphasizes work-integrated learning opportunities and strong industry relationships (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2009). However, the perspective of the client in client-centered learning has, to date, been largely ignored.

#### THE WIIFM EFFECT

Individuals live their lives and make choices by considering What's in it for me? (WIIFM). The WIIFM Effect has been referred to in a wide range of scholarly contexts, from empowerment in the workplace (e.g. Nicholls, 1995) and change management (e.g. Sullivan, Sullivan, & Buffton, 2001), to counseling (e.g. Campbell & Brigman, 2005) and most importantly, student learning (e.g. Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Jun, 2005). The WIIFM Effect is also particularly prominent throughout the PR curriculum, where it is used to explain the importance of recognizing different stakeholders' motivations and interests. For example, when second year media relations students are considering story angles for media releases, they are encouraged to keep in mind that journalists will most likely ask themselves: What is in this story that is of interest to me? And most importantly: why is it going to be relevant to my readers? Public relations theory is strongly based on the notion of two way symmetrical, beneficial relationships (Grunig & Dozier, 1992). No matter whether as a part of a comprehensive community engagement exercise, whilst addressing shareholders at an AGM or when designing a company newsletter, the WIIFM factor will play a crucial role for communicators in ensuring their message is appropriate and relevant.

Real life clients, like any business representative, have to meet a number of conflicting demands on their time. Consequently, the WIIFM effect will no doubt influence the level of interest and active participation in any client-centered learning activity, enabling practitioners to weigh up student and university engagement against other demands and

interests. A perceived low level of personal benefits may lead to either a lack of interest throughout the project or the decision not to participate in the first place. Educators have to recognize that clients ALWAYS have an agenda - and a personal interest at heart.

#### PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSULTANCY

According to Kerr and Proud (2005), public relations employers are particularly looking for graduates with relevant work experience. Graduate employment and industry closeness are also a particular focus of Curtin University's Business School, particularly since the introduction of the university's *triple i* curriculum, which requires opportunity for work-integrated learning and career development to be integrated across curriculum and assessment activities.

As early as in 1976, Mintzberg encouraged educators to make greater use of experiential and creative skill-development techniques, thereby allowing students to not only practice their interpersonal skills, but also those of information and decision management. Mintzberg called for a balance between analytic and intuitive skills, recognizing the value of both right and left brain thinking, which would ultimately improve students' career opportunities. Students in Parsons and Lepkowska-White's (2009) study may have described the client-centered learning experience as work intensive and frustrating; however, it is this level of ambiguity that will prepare them for their post university careers. As Mintzberg explains, "effective managers seem to revel in ambiguity; in complex, mysterious systems with relatively little order" (p. 53).

Consequently, Public Relations Consultancy has moved away from the safety provided in earlier public relations units, by requiring students to work as independent teams on a real life scenario. In order to enrich student learning and understanding of professional public relations practice, the final year PR Consultancy unit has been entirely designed around a real life client. As early as in week two, students are briefed by their client on a current communications challenge, which essentially provides the focus for the rest of the semester. The unit places a strong emphasis on market intelligence and industry research, and requires students to first pitch their recommendations and creative ideas in the classroom environment, before submitting a comprehensive written communications strategy. Particularly attractive is the invitation for top performers (usually the three highest scoring teams) to present their ideas and recommendations directly to the client in an authentic boardroom pitch at the end of the semester.

#### THE CHALLENGE

Seeing the glow in students' eyes, I could have easily been led to believe that having an attractive, well known client, - a West Australian AFL team - would result in a rewarding learning experience. How couldn't it? My students were motivated, passionate in their support for either this team or their local rival, and extremely proud to have been given the opportunity 'to finally work with a for-profit client.' However, what looked like a rewarding semester at the outset, turned into a major disappointment for all parties. Three months later the relationship had dramatically cooled: the involvement of athletes in the live briefings never eventuated. A last minute change in staff availability resulted in a 90 minute promotional talk, rather than a student briefing. And the final pitch recommendations were received rather

lukewarm by two of the organisation's most junior members of staff. Involvement by the CEO was another promise that never eventuated.

Where had we gone wrong? The key contact was one of our recent graduates, a student that may have not stood out academically during her time at university, but had excelled well over the past 18 months in her new position. She was invited as a client, as part of a wider partnership between the club and the university's business school. Consequently, the initial arrangements were not handled by the unit coordinator directly. On reflection, the staff member had been too junior, lacking direct access to top management and most importantly: missing any real passion for the project, not to mention the unit. Essentially, from her perspective, she was doing the university 'a favour.'

The dramatic failure of what set out to be one of the School's major highlights prompted an extensive review, refocus and analysis of the unit's client relationships. Was it the 'for profit' element that made this relationship fail? Or should we stay clear of sporting teams? Interestingly, the next semester saw a complete reversal: the unit welcomed another State-based league club as client and again, the major contact was a recent graduate. Despite initial reservations, based on the recent disappointment, this project turned into one of the most rewarding experiences for the unit to date, for students, staff, as well as the client. (Personal reflection, Wolf)

These experiences in early 2008 prompted the unit coordinator to take a more strategic approach to the selection of clients and encouraged an analysis of the client-university relationship, with the underlying aim to understand common themes and indicators that aid in the creation of mutually beneficial learning experiences.

## METHOD

This paper is based on a critical reflection on, and analysis of, twelve semester-long, client-based projects as part of the third year Public Relations Consultancy unit. Over the course of the past three and a half years, the unit coordinator maintained detailed, reflective notes on individual client arrangements and their outcomes. Informal feedback from 16 industry representatives, email exchanges and semi-structured interviews with seven clients provided further first hand insight into the client perspective. Additionally, informal and formal end-of-semester feedback from over 200 students, collected throughout the seven semesters, was taken into account when determining the success of individual arrangements. Informal feedback consisted of emails and research notes, based on verbal communication with students. End of semester feedback varies depending on enrolment numbers and response rate, usually representing between 30-45 percent of each student cohort.

In sharp contrast to the existing research literature on client-centered learning, the focus of this project has been primarily on the industry representative as the real life client. Clients included an Australian hotel chain, two state-based sports clubs (including an AFL team), five state-wide charities (disability services, domestic violence, general health and wellbeing as well as twice children's health), a local activist group, a foster care agency, a communications consultancy and a state-based arts fund.

Research notes, transcripts, feedback comments and recordings of the client presentations and industry feedback were loaded into NVivo 8 for further analysis. Data was grouped

according to themes and coded by two independent researchers, followed by an intensive discussion about the characteristics of the emerging client roles. Based on this, the author was able to identify six distinctive client types. It is important to note that a client may enact a number of these roles to varying degrees. However, these roles do provide an insight into which types of client-university relationships have the potential to be successful. During a second round of data analysis, these six roles were matched against student feedback and the unit coordinator's field notes, resulting in the discovery of a hybrid role, representing what the author perceives as preferred client characteristics.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Why do some client projects look highly promising at the outset, but end up turning into a disaster? And why do others, that may not look very exciting in the beginning, develop into a success for all parties involved? This was the key research question for the author, aiming to improve the success rate for future client-based projects with the aid of guidelines and indicators.

An initial review found not-for-profit based projects to be more rewarding. However, the failure to look at individual client's motivations and interests might lead to over simplification and misinterpretation. Based on the initial identification of common themes, six distinctive client types emerged: The Social Justice Advocate, The Lifelong Learner, The Indebted Graduate, The Self Promoter (It's all about me!), The No Budget client, The Doing a Favor client, and Emergence of the Community Partner.

### *The Social Justice Advocate (SJA)*

Social justice advocates are extremely passionate about their cause, which may range from domestic violence and childcare arrangements to the preservation of natural resources. Their cause is part of their own identity, resulting in blurred lines between private life and work. These clients' main aim is to share their passion with students, who they often identify as a key target audience. Primarily, they want to encourage students to engage with the topic at hand and gain a more rounded insight into the issue. However, a secondary advantage is that SJA clients tend to lack internal resources and marketing/public relations expertise, which is something students can help with. On the other hand, the key challenge is that students often struggle to comprehend clients' internal limitations, which essentially will impact on the scope and feasibility of their recommendations. SJAs are passionate about their cause, which means briefing sessions can be rather lengthy and may go off track, requiring intervention by academic staff.

### *The Lifelong Learner (LL)*

The Lifelong Learner is passionate about education, not only in a PR or marketing context, but more likely in an area related to their business. In the context of this unit, examples have included tourism, foster care and generic management skills. LLs see client-based projects as an opportunity to share their passion for learning in general, communicating the power of knowledge. Whilst they may not have any expertise in the area of PR or marketing, they tend to be highly prepared, keen to become directly involved and are committed to providing extensive feedback. One of the challenges when dealing with L Ls is their frequently high expectations, which may not always match students' attitude towards the project.

*The Indebted Graduate (IG)*

Having truly enjoyed their time at university, the Indebted Graduate has a particular connection with the course, the unit or, in particular, client-centered learning. IG are not always those that were particularly strong academically. Rather, they have experienced work-integrated learning which, in turn, has ignited their passion for the public relations industry. Now they are keen to share this enthusiasm and their passion for their job. IGs might be relatively junior; however, if they work in a relevant area and benefit from direct management support, they can help to create a highly effective learning experience. One advantage is that they understand the unit and the frequently naïve attitude of students towards strategic business recommendations. They have graduated recently enough to understand the student perspective, but are equally keen to share the new insights gained in their role as client. Students love hearing from graduates, and unit coordinators benefit from being able to communicate with the client directly.

*The Self Promoter (It's all about me!) (SP)*

All clients have an agenda. Whilst this is true, the Self Promoter's agenda is ALL about themselves. They might be keen to position their business as committed to lifelong learning or 'giving back' to the community. However, at the end of the day, their key focus is on a promotional piece on their company website, alongside the university logo, and an article in their newsletter, showcasing them live in the act of engaging with students. Although SPs can be very passionate, their enthusiasm for the project itself tends to subside very quickly. Initially, they tend to 'drive' the university-consultancy relationship and promote the benefits of the arrangement. However, they might also make many promises that never eventuate. Unless unit coordinators have direct, personal access to the client, relationships like this can severely undermine the learning experience.

*The No Budget client (NB)*

Whilst a limited budget and lack of in-house PR and marketing resources might be a motivating factor for a wide range of clients, the No Budget client's primary focus is on free labor. A pure NB client is not interested in students' learning experience. Frequently, they are not even highly engaged in the initial briefing at the start of the semester, nor in the end of semester presentations. Essentially, the NB client is interested in a well researched, comprehensive document with relevant PR strategies and tactics that will help advance their organization.

*The Doing a Favor client (DF)*

Doing a Favour clients mean well, which makes this relationship very challenging. For one reason or another they might feel obliged to agree to the request to become a real life client. However, the problem is that that their decision was not thoroughly thought through, or they failed to be honest with themselves (and the university) when they made their initial commitment. Essentially, the DF's heart is not in the client-centered project due to other commitments, a lack of personal interest or, in many cases, because the key contact in the client organization has no runs on the board. This client might be relatively junior and still struggling to find their own feet in the industry. Additionally, they may lack senior management support. Essentially, they are too preoccupied with their own career – at whatever level this may be – to become fully engaged with a student learning project. DF

clients have the tendency to disappear, be non-contactable or unresponsive for longer periods at a time, which can drastically increase the academic coordinator's stress levels.

So, why did the AFL-club focused project fail? The key contact in this case was a DF client, with limited personal interest in the arrangement. Arranging a partnership package with the business school was an attractive opportunity; however, at the end of the day the graduate was still finding her own feet. Most importantly, the graduate was based in a sponsorship role and had limited access to the Communications Director and other key decision-makers. In contrast to this, the second sports club-based example was a full success due to the involvement of an IG, whose key focus was on sharing the passion for her new position. Equally, this was an opportunity to share an insight into her degree with the rest of the communications team. Most importantly, the key client contact had full support from the management team, which had experienced the progress she had made over the past 18 months. Consequently, they had very realistic expectations of what to expect from a student project. Access to free intelligence was undoubtedly an additional benefit, as the club was aiming to communicate more directly with the students' age group. However, it was not a prime motivator.

These six roles have not been developed as distinctive client profiles. They have been based on observations, feedback and first hand insight from real life clients, collected over a period of three and a half years. The author acknowledges that clients may enact a number of different roles at any given time. Whilst some elements of the SP or the NB client may be present in most relationships, a pure focus on free work by a client can have dramatic consequences. Equally, the SJA and LL might over-emphasize their own agenda, forgetting that final year public relations students tend to be in their early 20s and lack the life experience and expertise the client may be anticipating. Another risk is that the client is too focused on their own challenge at hand to fully understand the communications focus of the unit. As in all client-centered learning experiences, the unit coordinator needs to carefully balance the client's interests with the unit's learning objectives.

#### *Emergence of the Community Partner (CP)*

Over the course of the three and a half years, the Public Relations Consultancy unit has slowly distanced itself from DF and SP clients. Over the research period, NB clients had been the most dominant category (7), followed by SJA (6) and LL (5). This unintended shift prompted a further, thorough, analysis of successful partnerships, based on the original six client role framework. Based on a second round of coding and additional consultation of student feedback and the unit coordinator's reflective notes, a hybrid between the SJA and the LL, combined with some elements of NB clients and IG. Labeled the 'Community Partner', this type of client is interested in more than a fleeting, semester-long relationship. Instead, these are individuals that are committed to continuous professional development and personally value the engagement with education institutions. Once the project is completed, they are keen to continue their participation in student learning, by coming on board for other projects, or providing students with the opportunity to implement some of their ideas and recommendations during an industry placement. Despite the passion for their 'cause', and personal commitment to lifelong learning, Community Partners are very tolerant, acknowledging that some students may lack maturity, work experience and potentially industry specific skills. They undoubtedly ask themselves: What's in it for me? However, their key motivation is not the promotional piece on the company website or free



labor and industry intelligence. Instead, they treasure their self-imposed role as mentor, are genuinely interested in student learning, and cherish the close relationship with their local university.

## CONCLUSION

Despite an increased interest in client-centered projects in teaching and learning literature, the perspective of one of the key stakeholders in the learning experience – the client – has been largely ignored in scholarly research to date. Like any other stakeholder, clients ALWAYS have an agenda – however, this does not necessarily have to be a disadvantage, as long as all parties are aware of the potential implications.

This paper set out to provide insight into different client profiles, based on years of client-centered learning experiences. The author initially identified six distinctive client roles, recognizing that a client may enact a number of roles simultaneously and to varying degrees, at any given time. It is crucial to acknowledge that in their pure form, most of these roles would undermine – if not sabotage – industry-focused projects. Many appear in common combinations. For example, there is an undeniable link between the SJA and NB client.

A further analysis of successful client projects has seen the emergence of a new client type, the Community Partner. This is essentially a hybrid role, which crystallizes the essential ingredients of mutually beneficial, client-centered learning projects. CPs are keen to carefully discuss expectations at the outset of the project, and encourage the growth of a direct relationship between the unit coordinator and the client representative.

Client-based projects can be a very rewarding experience for students, academic staff and clients. The author acknowledges that client-based projects are not safe alternatives to teacher-centered learning activities (Wolf, 2008). Essentially, clients will ask themselves: What's in it for me?, when they are invited to participate in university projects. Unless the client's and university's objectives, business interest and learning aims match closely, the project runs the risk of being hijacked to meet one of the client's various agendas. However, whilst educators cannot afford to ignore the WIIFM effect's impact on the client-centered learning experience, client-based projects can be an extremely rewarding experience for students, academic staff and industry representatives alike, when a Community Partner with the appropriate intentions is chosen.

The author encourages teaching staff to discuss clients' motivation at the outset of a learning project, so avoiding being misled by either the organization's profile or the superficial appeal of the proposed project. Instead, it is recommended the final decision be based on a careful assessment of the key client contact and their interest in establishing a long term, mutually beneficial, relationship between university and industry.

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#### ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education, or work integrated learning (WIL), issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based. In 2010, Australian Research Council (ARC), which administers the Excellence in Research (ERA) ranking system, awarded APJCE a 'B' ERA ranking (top 10-20%).

Cooperative education/WIL in the journal is taken to be work-based learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of an academic program of study. More specifically, cooperative education/WIL can be described as a strategy of applied learning which is a structured program, developed and supervised either by an educational institution in collaboration with an employer or industry grouping, or by an employer or industry grouping in collaboration with an educational institution. An essential feature is that relevant, productive work is conducted as an integral part of a student's regular program, and the final assessment contains a work-based component. Cooperative education/WIL programs are commonly highly structured and possess formal (academic and employer) supervision and assessment. The work is productive, in that the student undertakes meaningful work that has economic value or definable benefit to the employer. The work should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program.

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